NEW
NICK CARTER
WEEKLY

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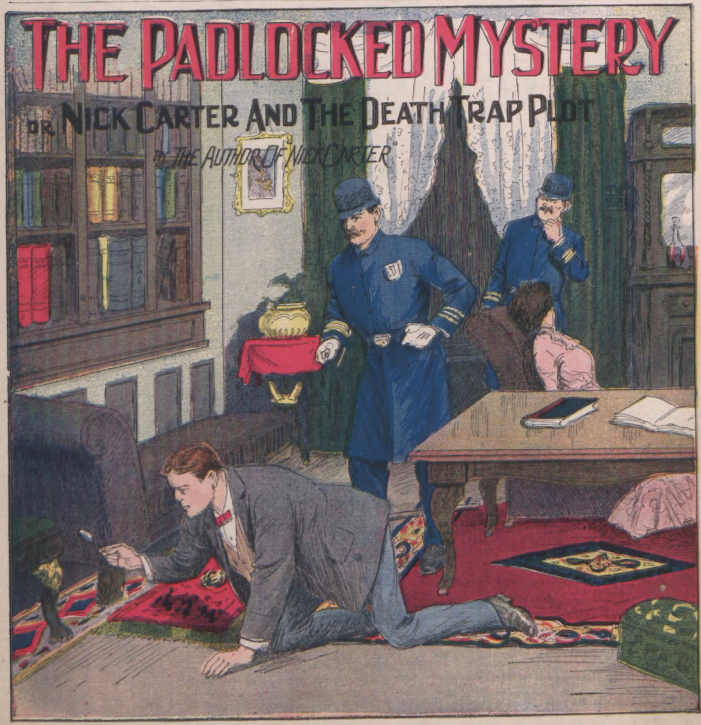
THE PADLOCKED MYSTERY

OR NICK CARTER AND THE DEATH TRAP PLOT

By THE AUTHOR OF NICK CARTER



The two policemen watched with breathless interest while Nick Carter went down on his hands and knees, and made a searching examination with his magnifying glass.

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The Padlocked Mystery:

OR,

NICK CARTER AND THE DEATH-TRAP PLOT.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

THE FOOTPRINTS IN THE SNOW.

A policeman in uniform was in the act of passing a house in Twenty-third Street, New York, when he came to a sudden halt and fixed his eyes searchingly upon the ground—or rather the pavement, for the spot at which he was gazing was flagged—while he uttered an exclamation of surprise and remarked, addressing himself:

"That's odd; mighty odd, that is!"

The house before which he was standing was a low, wide structure of brick; that is to say, it consisted of two stories and a mansard roof in height, while its width covered rather more than two ordinary city lots.

Again, the edifice stood fully thirty feet back from the street, and was separated from the wide and much traveled thoroughfare by a high, wrought-iron fence of curious workmanship and design.

From the sidewalk to the tops of the sharp-pointed pickets the distance was fully nine feet, and in the middle of its extent, which was seventy-five feet, there was a wide double gate which opened at the center, and which was flanked on either side by square posts of solid masonry, which in turn were topped by arches of gristling points like the tops of the iron pickets.

This gate opened into the yard—when it was opened at all—but at the present moment it was closed, while around the two pickets where the two gates came together was a steel chain which was fastened in place by a large brass padlock, now securely locked.

The gate—that if, of course, the double gate—was sufficiently wide to permit the passing of a carriage if the occasion for such use should arise. Directly back from the gate was a rustic creation of rocks and shells where there had once been a spouting fountain, the whole being decorated with mosses and ferns. Now, however, there was none of that, for to the certain knowledge of the policeman who paused so suddenly before the gate, the

house had not been lived in during the last four or five years—he really thought it was five.

The walk, or driveway, circled around this defunct fountain, and finally passed under an unpretentious *porte cochere.*

The immediate cause of the sudden halt of the officer and the exclamation of surprise that had escaped him, was the discovery he made that there were foot tracks in the snow inside the gate.

The time was almost two hours past midnight in the month of February. A gentle snow had been falling all the evening, but had ceased at, or a few moments before, midnight, at which time the clouds had drifted away and the moon and stars succeeded them; more than that, there was an electric arc-light directly across the street from the place where the officer stopped.

"That's odd; mighty odd, that is!" he repeated, after a moment of reflection; and then, turning his gaze from the footprints in the snow, to the lock and chain on the gate, he discovered that the soft snow which should have been clinging to both lock and chain, as it did to the palings of the fence, and even to the arrow-shaped points of the pickets, was absent.

He reached out tentatively and touched the chain and the lock with his fingers; but only to discover that each was firmly in its place. The chain was wound twice around the contiguous pickets of each half of the gate, exactly as it had been during the four or five years that the officer had been familiar with the place, and the lock was securely fastened.

Nevertheless, inside the gate, there were tracks in the snow. It was a soft, wet snow of the quality which boys delight in for snowballs, and it had clung to everything it touched with the persistency of paste.

And there were two tracks side by side. One of them was apparently made by the large firm tread of a man; the other represented the dainty shod feet of a well-dressed woman—for it is true that the *tout ensemble* of a person's dress may usually be correctly judged from the appearance of the shoes alone.

The footprints were side by side, as if the man and the woman had passed through the gate arm in arm; and they led around to the right of the old fountain toward the entrance to the house under the *porte cochere.*

"That's mighty odd, that is," the officer repeated again. And then he added: "To my certain knowledge that house hasn't been lived in for pretty near five years; and now I'll be blowed if a man and a woman haven't gone in there, just as if they owned the place. And they must have had a key, too, for the gate is locked now, and I know it was locked the last time I saw it. I wonder if I ought to telephone to the station-house about it, or just make a note of it and report the matter when I go off duty in the morning?"

He shook his head in doubt after asking himself the question.

But he did not move away from the spot. Instead, he clung to the iron fence with both hands, leaning forward with his face between two of the metal palings, and with his mind so intently fixed upon the discovery he had made that he did not notice the approach of other footsteps, nor suspect that another person was near him until he was startled by feeling the weight of a hand upon his shoulder, and hearing a voice exclaim:

"Hello, Clune! What is the matter? Are you sick?"

The policeman wheeled suddenly, and then when he perceived the identity of the person who had interrupted his revery, a glad smile covered his face, and he exclaimed:

"Mr. Carter, by all that's lucky!"

"Why is it lucky, Clune?" asked Nick Carter, for it was indeed the great detective who had so unexpectedly appeared on the scene. "What are you staring at? Hello! What is that?"

"Footprints," replied Clune laconically.

"So I see. How did they get in there? Is the gate unfastened?"

"No, sir. It is locked—locked fast, just as it has been all along."

"Humph!" said the detective. Then he examined the lock for himself; after which he asked:

"How long have you been here, Clune? How long is it since you discovered those footprints, eh?"

"Maybe it's ten minutes—it isn't more than that," was the reply.

The detective looked at his watch.

"Just two o'clock," he mused, half aloud. "What time did it stop snowing, Clune?"

"Well, sir, it couldn't have been more than two or three minutes either side of midnight, I think."

"And if that is the case," replied Nick Carter, "it follows that those footprints cannot have been made much more than two hours ago, doesn't it?"

"Yes, sir. It does."

"There is one funny thing about them, Clune."

"So I think, sir."

"What is that? What do you think it is?"

"Well, sir, I thought it was rather funny that there should be any footprints there at all; and then I thought it was funnier that they should lead into that cold, fireless house which hasn't been lived in for five years——"

"Is it five years, Clune?"

"Yes, sir; I would swear that it is; but we can find the exact record of it at the station-house."

"Yes; I know. Go on with what you were saying."

"I thought it was odd that anybody——especially a woman—should go into that cold house on a winter's night and not come out again. I don't suppose there is any way of starting a fire in there—do you?"

"Probably not. I don't know. But, Clune, you have not observed the thing which is the oddest about the whole affair, I think."

"What is that, sir?"

"The man did not remain. He came out again."

"What, sir?"

"The man did not remain inside the house. After he took his companion there, he returned and passed through the gate, and so took his departure, leaving the woman there alone."

"I don't see how you make that out, Mr. Carter. There are only two tracks. One is made by a man and the other by a woman. Both tracks lead one way—that is, toward the house. I don't see any sign of a man's tracks, returning."

"Don't you? Look again."

"I have looked, sir, but——"

"Observe closely the tracks he made. Here; stand where I am. The light is a little bit better here. Now what do you see?"

"Just what I did before, sir. Two tracks; one of them made by a woman, and the other——"

"Aren't there three tracks? Look at the footprints made by the man. Don't you notice anything remarkable about them?"

"No, sir."

"That is strange. It is quite evident to me that after the man walked toward the house—some time after that, I suppose—he returned; but when he returned, he walked backward, and he used every precaution to place his feet exactly in the tracks he made when he entered."

"That is as sure as you're alive, sir!" gasped Clune. "But upon my life, I should never have noticed it. But I see it now, all right. Why do you suppose he took the trouble to do that, sir?"

"I suppose he did not wish to give the impression that after two persons had entered the place, only one had come out."

"Do you suppose, sir, that there has been foul play done here? Do you think that the footprints suggest a crime? Or——"

"Not too fast, Clune," replied Nick, smiling. "We must not jump at conclusions; but I will admit that the whole thing looks rather shady to me."

"Yes, sir. So it does, now that you have discovered that the man came out again."

"Clune."

"Yes, sir."

"While we talked, I have been examining this padlock. It is rather a complicated affair. I don't suppose there are more than two or three keys in the world that will fit it—but even if there is but one, the man who entered through the gate, possessed that key. It was a thin, flat key, of the Yale pattern. It is a lock that I cannot pick —so I think, Clune, that you had better give me a leg up this fence."

"What, sir! Are you going into the house?"

"That is my present intention—if I can get into it, and I think I can."

"That is a bad fence to climb, Mr. Carter. You are likely to get hung up on the pickets."

"Oh, I think not. I will chance it, anyway. Here. Hold your hands together—so. That is right. Now I will step into them, and then leap to your shoulders. When I get up there, you are to grasp the fence and hold tightly, while you stand steadily and firmly. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"I will leap from your shoulders over the top of the fence. Now; are you ready?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then here goes!"

Five seconds later Nick Carter alighted safely on the opposite side of the iron fence.

"Stand where you are, Clune," he said to the officer. "Stand with your back toward the house, and hold that position until I return."

"Yes, sir. I will, sir."

CHAPTER II.

A TERRIBLE DISCOVERY.

Policeman Michael Clune had all his life been accustomed to discipline.

His superior officers had said of him frequently that if he had a fault as an officer, it consisted in the fact that he had never been known to exceed or to fall short of the letter of the orders he received. This was doubtless the reason so excellent an officer had always remained a patrolman; it was why he had never been advanced.

Clune possessed no initiative. He did what he was told to do, and exactly as he had been instructed to do it. He never went beyond that point.

When Nick Carter scaled the iron fence, and left Clune standing just outside, his last instructions were: "Stand with your back toward the house and hold that position until I return;" then the detective had disappeared around the fountain in the direction of the house door, and that was the last Clune saw of him.

He did as he had been told to do.

He wheeled until he faced the street—until he had assumed a position in which his back was directly toward the house—and he remained in that attitude, face front, eyes straight ahead until he was stiff from the standing in one position, and until even he, automaton that he was in the matter of obeying orders, began to feel a vague sense of wonder that the detective had not returned.

Clune had no idea how much time had really elapsed when he did, finally, half turn and peep out of the corner of his eye in the direction that Nick Carter had taken after he leaped the fence.

After a little more time, he turned his entire body around and once more stood with his face pressed between the palings, gazing at the tracks in the snow—of which there were now more than before, for those of the detective had been added to them.

"I wonder what the divil is keepin' him?" muttered Clune to himself. Whenever he was in any degree agitated, the native thickness of his tongue asserted itself in his speech. "Sure it must be a long time since Misther Caarter wint over th' fence. Faith, I think I'll have a squint at me watch. He said it was two o'clock, and by the powers I think it's all of an hour since that time."

He took that aforesaid squint at his watch, and even his phlegmatic temperament was disturbed by the discovery he made, for he saw at once that an hour and a half had elapsed since the disappearance of the detective.

"Now, that can't be right," muttered Clune. "I wonder if he expects me to obey orders and to stand here like a stoughton bottle, or a wooden Indian, till daylight—'r till doomsday, f'r the matter of that. It was two o'clock whin he wint over the fence, and sure, it's half-past three now."

He wasted another fifteen minutes in peering through the fence, without moving his body at all, and then he muttered:

"Now, I wonder if it is up to me to go over the fence after him, or is it me duty to report the affair at the station-house? Faith, it's——"

"What are you doing there, Clune?" demanded a harsh voice directly behind him; and Clune wheeled instantly to face the roundsman.

"Sure," he said, "I've stood here till I'm stiff, so I have."

"So I should think. I have been all over your beat after you. I'll have to re——"

"Wait, McGarrity; wait," interrupted Clune. "There's a reason for it. Do ye happen to see thim footprints inside the fence?"

"Sure I do. I'm not blind. Is it studying them ye've been up to for the last two hours, and have ye made out yet whether they were made by man or baste?" replied the roundsman sarcastically.

"Thim two," said Clune solemnly, "I don't know any thing about;" and he pointed at his original discovery. "But the track there!—sure I know all about thim!"

"Perhaps ye'll be afther tellin' me, Misther Clune."

"I will that. Thim tracks that you see there—right there!—thim tracks were made by the feet av Nick Carter."

"Eh? What's that?"

"Nick Carter made thim tracks, and by the same token I saw him whin he made 'em. It was this way, McGarrity: I had just discovered the other tracks. I was lookin' at thim through th' fince palings an' wonderin' what they were whin up walks Nick Carter; an' he says to me, says he, 'Clune, there were two persons wint inty that house, but begorra only wan came out. Th' woman is in there yet;' and, says I——"

"Oh, drop it and tell me the facts."

"Well, he asked me to boost him over the fince—which I did. Then says he, 'Clune, stand there where you are, with your back toward the house, and hold that position until I return'—which I did, likewise."

"And how long ago was that?"

"Two o'clock, by his watch."

"And now it's a quarter of four."

"I suppose it is."

"And do ye mane to till me that ye've stood here like a stump in a peat bed iver since that time, Clune?"

"Sure I have. Didn't he tell me——"

"Oh, shut up!"

"I was just debatin' in me mind whether I'd go inty the house and try to find him, or if I would telephone to the station-house, when you came along, sir."

The roundsman was a man of action. He did not hesitate.

His first act was to walk along the fence in search of a loose picket—but he found none. Then he returned toward the gate again, following along the gutter in search of a loose paving-stone—and presently, when he was almost exactly in front of the gate, his foot touched an article that was half concealed by the snow.

It rang against the pavement with a sharp, metallic sound, and, bending over, the roundsman picked up in his hands a short, thick iron bar which he held up before his face so that the glow of the arc-light across the street fell upon it.

"It's a jimmy," he said laconically. "Sure, it's just the thing."

He did not stop then to inquire, or even to conjecture how a burglar's jimmy should have been in that particular spot at that time, but he approached the gate with it, and having inserted one end of the powerful tool under the chain which held the gates together, it was only the work of an instant more to break it.

The chain and the lock as well, the latter still fastened through the links, fell to the pavement, and Clune stopped and picked them up. Then, as he dropped them into one of his pockets McGarrity pushed the gates open and ordered Clune to follow him.

"Shut thim gates after you, Clune," ordered the roundsman. "Drop the latch into place, and then fellow me. Have your gun ready, too, for if Nick Carter went inty the house and hasn't come out again, it's up to us to kape our two eyes open, so it is."

"Have ye a light with you?" asked Clune.

"Sure I have. It's wan av thim electric things with which I search in darrk corners for the likes av you fellows, whin you're sleepin' on your beats," and he produced an article of almost the size and very much of the same shape as his night stick.

They had reached the pillars of the *porte cochere* by now, and McGarrity pressed the button of his electric light and threw the glare of it into the dark recess beyond them.

The two policemen instantly discovered that the carved walnut door stood wide open, and with McGarrity leading the way they passed through into the front hall of the house.

Instantly they were oppressed with a sense of desolation.

The place was chill, cold, musty, deserted.

The dust of several years had settled over everything in that impalpable manner so often found in deserted houses.

The flashing of the light along the hall revealed the fact that it was fully and elegantly furnished; and when they passed from the hall into the library on the right it at once became evident that when the people who had lived there had gone out they had left everything just as they had used it. Save for the dust, the sense of desertion, the cold, and the desolation of the place, one might readily have supposed that the house was still inhabited.

A piano at one side of the room was open. There was a sheet of music on the rack. The stool was in place in front of the instrument. An easy chair was drawn up quite near to the table in the middle of the room, and there was a drop-light on the table near the chair, and there were papers scattered on the floor around it, for all the world as if a person had been seated there, reading, at the time of the final desertion of the house.

There was a book, open in the middle and lying face down on the table; there was a tray for the reception of ashes near it—and it was half filled with the refuse of smoked cigars, there being no less than five stumps there, as well as a cigar which had been put aside immediately after lighting; this was resting over the edge of the table.

All this, just described, the two officers saw at a glance.

They saw other things also which carried out to rather more completeness the same general idea; but they did not then stop to study them, or even to consider them.

The thing that they did seek—some sign of the presence of the detective—they did not find, and after a hasty flashing of the light around the library they withdrew toward a room to the rear of it.

This was separated from the library by folding doors, and they were half closed, so that McGarrity, who was in advance, was obliged to force them still farther apart before he could pass his somewhat bulky physique between them.

And the room itself were merely another library—that is, if its character was to be determined by its appearance, for the walls were lined with well-filled bookcases.

This, however, was not what attracted them and startled them also, almost the instant they entered the room, although they did take in the detail already mentioned.

But instantly when McGarrity passed the threshold—and Clune was only a step behind him—he came to a halt in his tracks, and, pointing with the gleaming eye of the light he carried across the room, he cried out:

"My God, Clune! Look there!"

There was a leather-covered chair of the sleepy-hollow pattern close beside an oblong library table in the center of the room—and the chair was occupied.

The electric light in the officer's hand which at that distance assumed the diameter of about a foot, shone squarely and brightly upon the face of a woman—and it revealed also the fact that she was dead.

Indeed, the face had been battered with some heavy instrument, until not a trace of the outlines of her features remained as a means of identification. If it had been the object of the murderer to place his victim beyond the pale of recognition he had undoubtedly succeeded, for the face of the woman was reduced to a pulp—to a repulsive, hideous, unrecognizable mass of blood and bone and hair and flesh.

The light shed by the electric lantern in the grasp of McGarrity, although brilliant, was necessarily small in diameter and circumference—and it's very brilliancy placed everything that was outside its range in deeper shadow; so, as they gazed upon the discovery they had made, the two officers saw nothing else at all.

For quite a minute they stood there, looking upon the dead woman, and during the interval neither of them moved.

But then, as if suddenly realizing that they were losing valuable time, McGarrity started forward toward the corpse of the woman.

"Come, Clune," he said, "we must——"

He tripped over something that was stretched upon the floor between him and the body of the woman; and he pitched forward with such force that he released his hold upon the lantern, as a consequence of which the light went out and they were plunged in utter darkness.

Clune raised his revolver ready to fire, for his first thought was that McGarrity had been attacked; but the fright lasted only an instant, for the roundsman hastily recovered himself, reached out for his light, found it, pressed the button and turned the glare toward the thing that had tripped him.

And that ring of light fell full upon the face of Nick

Carter, where he was stretched upon his back along the floor, directly in front of the body of the murdered woman.

CHAPTER III.

A MURDERER'S DEATH-TRAP.

Neither of the policemen had any doubt, in that first instant following their discovery, that the detective was dead, and for the space of a minute they remained mute and motionless where they were.

The upturned face of the detective was white and drawn, save for a mark, which was already turning blue, that extended across his forehead from the right side near the hair down to a spot close to the eyebrow.

He was lying on the floor on his back, at full length, with his hands at his sides—and beside him, quite close to his body, was a long, thick, heavy iron implement which workers in stone describe by the name "crowbar."

McGarrity had been on the police force a long time, and he was rather bright in his profession; so the instant he saw the crowbar and realized that it was this instrument that had stricken the detective down, an expression of relief crossed his countenance—for the reason that he knew instantly that if Nick Carter had been struck with that weapon in the hands of an assailant his skull would have been crushed like an egg-shell and he would be almost as unsightly as the woman in the chair.

As it was, a glance told the officer that the blow had been a slight and a glancing one, but that owing to the great weight of the implement it had knocked the detective senseless.

Even as they gazed at the detective without moving, in the excess of their first surprise, he moved uneasily and moaned slightly, as if with returning consciousness.

The two policeman raised the detective from the floor and bore him across the room to a wide, soft couch, where they made him more comfortable; and then, like experienced nurses, they began to chafe his hands and slap them in order to start up the circulation of his blood.

"Get outside, Clune," ordered the roundsman. "Run to the corner and kick in Maloney's back door if ye have to, but bring some brandy here. Maybe ye'll find him up and gettin' ready to open at five; but git a move on ye, man!"

Clune was gone before the roundsman had finished with his directions; and he was back again in a surprisingly short time with the brandy; for he had been fortunate enough to find that Maloney was already open. Indeed it is doubtful if he had been closed up at all—only the policemen did not care to regard it in just that light. It was worth their while not to do so, since Maloney was a power in the ward.

But the brandy acted with wonderful effect upon the congealed blood of the detective, and after two or three swallows of it had been passed down his throat he sighed deeply and opened his eyes.

But he closed them instantly again, for the brilliant light carried by McGarrity was shining directly into them; and after a moment he whispered:

"Are you there, Clune?"

"Sure, I am that, sir; and McGarrity's with me."

"That's good. What hit me?"

"It was a crowbar, sir."

"Indeed? I thought it was a house that fell on me. Who was it that hit me?"

"Divil a wan of us knows that same, sir."

"I think it was nobody at all, sir," said McGarrity, interrupting at this moment.

"Hello! That you, McGarrity?"

"Yes, sir."

"You don't suppose that I hit myself, do you?"

"No, sir."

"Help me to sit up. There. That's better. Now, McGarrity, what do you mean by saying that it was nobody at all who hit me when in the same breath Clune says that I was hit with a crowbar?"

"Sure, sir, it is my opinion that the thing fell onto ye. If a two-months-old babby had cracked ye on the nut with that thing—always providin' that wan av thim could lift it at all, at all—ye wouldn't have had any head left on top of ye."

"I guess that's right, too—if it was a crowbar."

"It was that. Here it is. See it?" and McGarrity held it up for his inspection.

Nick nodded his head; and then he asked:

"Is the corpse of the woman there in the chair yet?"

"It is, sir."

"It couldn't very well walk away of itself, could it? You see, boys, when I came into this room I had my light in my hand. It is something like that one of yours, McGarrity, only it is a better one; I think you will find it lying on the floor somewhere around here, for I had it in my hand when I was knocked down."

"Yes, sir. Here it is."

"All right. Give it to me. Thank you. The first thing I discovered when I entered the room was the corpse of the woman in the sleepy-hollow chair, and I went up close to it. Then as I leaned over it something struck me on the head, and that is the last I knew till just now. How long ago was it, Clune?"

"More than an hour and a half, sir."

"Eh? So long as that? It doesn't seem as if I should have been unconscious so long as that, does it?"

"But you have, sir."

"Oh, well, we will look for an explanation of it later on."

"I think I know the explanation of it now, sir," said the roundsman.

"Do you? What is it?"

"Well, sir, there is a long thread attached to this iron bar—twenty feet of it, almost."

"What of that, McGarrity."

"The thing fell on you, sir. It struck you a glancing blow on the forehead. It has left a welt and a black-and-blue mark where it struck ye, too."

"I have no doubt of it; but go on."

"Maybe, Mr. Carter, you will remember that you tripped against something at the moment before you received the blow."

"I think I do, now that you have mentioned it. Why?"

"Well, sir, I am not a detective, but it has struck me that the man who murdered that woman and left her here sort of got an idea in his head that—well, I don't know what it was, only——"

"Go on. Tell me what you think."

The detective was sitting bolt upright now, and every trace of the lassitude he had exhibited since his awakening from the effects of the blow had vanished. He was all interest in the subject now, for the roundsman had suggested a new idea to him.

"Well, sir, there is a small screw-eye fastened into the ceiling exactly over the corpse, and it is my belief that the heavy crowbar was suspended over the dead woman by this thread I have found; after that the thread could be brought down under the table, where a turn or two would be taken around one of its legs and after that the thread would be carried across the room, a few inches above the floor and make fast to the grate in the fireplace."

"Go on, McGarrity. You have got ideas. I think you are quite a promising detective."

"Well, sir, you see if that was done just as I have described it any one who approached the corpse from the door where you entered the room—and where we did, too—would kick against the thread just at the instant of bending down over the dead body."

"Quite right. Go on. You are getting mightily interesting."

"That thread, sir, was barely strong enough to sustain the weight of the iron bar. Where it was attached to the bar I find that it was in the shape of an inverted letter Y, with a loop around either end of the bar—or quite near to either end, in order to hold the thing in a horizontal position. But the point is that the thread was barely strong enough to sustain the weight of the bar."

"I understand you perfectly."

"One had barely to touch that thread without breaking it. If it were broken the bar would fall. If a person were bending over the corpse when the bar fell it would strike that person, presumably on the head, and the weight of it would be sufficient to accomplish what was done to you."

"Sure."

"The ceiling is about twelve feet up—it is very high. The bar weighs at least twenty-five pounds. If it fell half the distance and struck a person squarely upon the head it might crush his skull."

"Quite so."

"But you were wearing your hat. Anyhow, it did not strike you squarely. That is all, sir."

Nick Carter smiled—and he asked:

"But why should you suppose that a murderer would take all that trouble to arrange a dead fall over his victim, who was already dead? Eh? Why should we have stolen a chapter from one of Anna Katherine Greene's novels—'The Filagree Ball' it was—and arranged the affair here for the reception of the first person who appeared on the scene? Eh?"

"I have read that story, sir, and that is what suggested this idea to me; but, all the same, I cannot reply to your questions, unless——"

"Unless what?"

"Unless he might have thought that just what did happen *would* happen."

"I don't understand."

"Well, sir, you came in here alone; you did bend over the corpse; the bar did fall, and it did knock you down. It rendered you insensible—unconscious—and you remained so until we found you. If you had not left Chune outside on the watch and he had not been able to tell me that you had entered here, you might have remained where you were for several more hours before you were discovered—*and in that case the murderer would have had just that much more time in which to escape.*"

"Humph!" said the detective, and was silent.

"That is my idea, sir. I think the murderer hoped that somebody would come here alone, to make the discovery, and that the room below being dark, he would meet with exactly the experience that you encountered."

The detective shook his head.

"McGarrity," he said, "you have made a very fair deduction of these circumstances. Your ideas are splendid and you deserve a great deal of credit for thinking of them at all, and because of it I shall take pleasure in recommending you to the detective bureau at the very first opportunity I have; but——"

"Thank you very much, Mr. Carter."

"But you do not go into it far enough."

"No, sir, perhaps not."

"You must never make the mistake of supposing that two plus one and a half—or one and seven-eighths—make four. Two plus two are always required."

"Yes, sir."

"A murderer would not go to all that trouble of manufacturing and setting a death-trap merely on the *chance* that some unknown person would enter this room alone to discover the victim of the crime that had been committed here."

"Perhaps not, sir."

"A trap of such elaborateness as that one you have just described would be arranged only with a definite purpose. The man who did it arranged it for the reception of some *particular* person. He had reason to feel assured that that particular person would come here. He had reason to believe that the person would enter the house alone. Doubtless the expected person was summoned to find that woman here, either dead or alive. Without doubt she would have been known to that person; and, consequently, that person, be it man or woman, would rush forward to the corpse at once. No, McGarrity, it was a trap set for a particular individual, as sure as you stand there where you are. It was no haphazard arrangement. It was not devised in order to provide opportunity for escape, but it was arranged in order either to kill outright that expected visitor—or to throw suspicion of this murder upon that individual. By Jove, McGarrity, there is a whole lot of food for thought in this view of it; but we will leave it all for the present. Just now we have other duties to perform."

CHAPTER IV.

THE TRAIL OF THE MURDERER.

When Nick Carter stood upright he was for a moment somewhat unsteady on his feet; but the sensation was transitory, and ere he had taken half-a-dozen steps across the floor he felt that his strength had entirely returned, and that he was now capable of anything that might be demanded of him.

His first act was rather a remarkable one, and one which caused the two policemen to stare at him.

It was that he calmly struck a match into flame and then, reaching up to the great chandelier overhead, lighted the gas.

"I would like to know, sir, if you don't mind telling me, how the divil ye knew that the gas was turned on in the house," demanded McGarrity.

"I did not know it—but I believed that it was," replied the detective.

"Why so, sir?"

"Because the man who arranged that death fall required light. He could not work in the dark very well, and he could not hold an ordinary light while he worked. Therefore he must have turned on the gas."

"But one would suppose that the meter would have been removed from the house so long vacant as this one was."

"A meter is not necessary to the consumption of gas; it is only a device by which the company is permitted to make any charge against you they please. A piece of rubber hose would have served the murderer quite as well as a meter. However, we have the gas, and that is all we require."

"Yes, sir."

"Stand back now, both of you."

The policemen retreated to the door through which they had entered the room, and then the detective began his first examination.

His first care was to examine the body as systematically as he could without moving it, for the law required that he should leave it exactly as he found it until after the coroner had viewed it.

What he saw there in the sleepy-hollow chair we have already partly described.

The woman was rather slight in figure, and she was dressed as if she were quite youthful. The appearance of her hair and coiffure bore out this idea, too; and, in fact, the look of her hands, her arms and neck, and her entire general appearance suggested youth.

There was nothing left of her face to tell that it had been a human face, however. Youth or old age, beauty or ugliness, might have dwelt there, but it was all effaced now; there was nothing but a pulped mass of skin, crushed bone, and bruised flesh to encounter as one gazed upon her.

But her hair, where the blood had not clotted it, was a beautiful golden yellow, and it was therefore safe to assume that the eyes of the woman had been blue.

Her hands had been beautifully cared for, and the nails were manicured; the costume, too, was rich, stylish, and tasteful. Her feet were elegantly shod, and, altogether—if one covered from view that horribly revolting mass of bruised flesh which stood in the place of a face—it might be supposed that the murderer's victim had been a young and a beautiful woman, as well as one of wealth and refinement.

"I think I will elect to be with the coroner when he makes his examination," said the detective, as he turned away; and then, when he would have continued, he stopped suddenly and pointed toward an object that he saw lying on the floor near the door.

It was another metal bar, but this time it was short and thick, and as Nick Carter raised it in his hand he saw that it was clotted with blood, half-dried in some places; wholly dry in others.

But before he could make any remark McGarrity interrupted his thoughts.

"That, sir," said he, "is the steel jimmy that I found outside and with which I broke the chain on the gate in order to get in here."

"You found it outside, you say?" asked Nick.

"Yes, sir."

"Where?"

"In the gutter."

"Where in the gutter?"

"Forninst—that is to say, sir, directly in front of the gate."

"How did you happen to find it?"

"I was looking for a stone with which to smash the lock."

"And found this, eh?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did you look at it?"

"Hardly, sir."

"Well, look at your hands now, and see if there is not blood upon the one in which you carried this jimmy."

"Yes, sir, there is," replied McGarrity, with a shudder, after he had complied with the suggestion.

"Without a doubt," said the detective, "this is the instrument with which the murder was committed."

"Is that so, sir?"

"Look at it," replied Nick; and he passed it to the roundsman, while he continued with the examination of the room.

He had lighted every burner in the chandelier and also one side bracket, so the room was ablaze with light; and the two policemen, watching him, saw him pass rapidly from object to object, pausing here a moment, hesitating in another place, and finally halting for a considerable time in front of a buffet that stood between the windows, and upon which there was a half-filled decanter, while beside it were two glasses, one of them being still half full of the liquor that had been poured into it.

The detective raised that glass to his nostrils and smelt of it carefully. Then he tested the other one in the same manner; next he smelled of the contents of the decanter. Next he seemed to spend a long time in studying the remaining glasses on the buffet, of which there were many, although they, one and all, stood back against the base of it, and were covered with dust.

Finally he got upon a chair and looked at the two small shelves of the buffet, which were too high up for him to see readily from the floor; and at last he passed on around the room.

There was a leather-covered couch in one place, and he paused for some time in his examination of that article; and from there he passed to an easy chair which stood at the head of the couch.

Here for a moment he got down upon his hands and knees and examined the carpet around the chair with a magnifying-glass, and then suddenly he turned to the roundsman and said:

"McGarrity, I wish you would take that electric light of mine and have a look around that front room. Examine around the edges of the room, close to the walls, or under the edge of the center-table, and if you don't find——"

"What am I to search for, sir?"

"A spot—a very small spot, probably—but nevertheless a place where some snow has melted, leaving a wet spot."

"I'm just to look for a spot of wet, sir?"

"Just that. Just a place where overshoes have been laid aside for a moment, and where the snow, if there was any on them, has melted. Or possibly it may not have melted yet. You may find the snow itself."

McGarrity did as directed, while Nick proceeded with his own investigation.

But after a moment he heard the officer calling to him.

"Here it is, Mr. Carter," he said; and then he appeared in the doorway, exclaiming:

"By all that's wonderful, sir, I wish you would tell me how the divil you knew that I would find out here; and almost to a certainty *where* I would find it at that."

"Where did you find it?"

"Under the edge of the center-table."

"And what did you find *it*?"

"Just what you said I would. Some little spots of wet and a few bits of snow."

"All right."

"Will you tell me, sir, how you knew that they were there?"

"Because, in the first place, there were only two people in this room at the time of the murder. They were the murderer and the murdered one."

"Yes, sir, I supposed that much."

"Oh, did you? Well, I did not. I supposed until a moment ago that there were three here."

"Well, sir, I'm a fool, I know; but——"

"Wait, now."

"Yes, sir."

"The person who committed the murder arranged that little death-trap after the deed was done. She——"

"*She!* Did I understand you to say *she?*"

"Yes. The murderer was a woman."

"But those tracks in the snow were never made by a woman."

"Oh, yes, they were. That is why I sent you to look for the place where the overshoes had been deposited after she removed them."

"Oh! I see. You mean——"

"I mean that the woman who came here with the victim of the murder plot wore a larger pair of shoes—men's shoes, they were, too—over her own. I do not think that, strictly speaking, they were overshoes, save that they were shoes that were large enough to slip over the outsides of those she already wore. Now, if my understanding of what happened here is correct, I do not believe that the victim who lies dead in that chair knew about those extra shoes or suspected that her companion wore them; *and I know* that she did not wear them all the time she was in this room.

"If she did not wear them all the time she was here she must have removed them after her arrival. If the girl who was killed did not suspect that her companion wore them at all it follows that the murderer must have gone into the other room to take them off. The fact that

you discovered traces of them about where I supposed you would do so only goes to establish the truth of my conjectures thus far."

"You're right, sir; it does that."

"You see, McGarrity—step over this way and I will show you—it was snowing outside when these two people started for this place. The murderer knew that she would leave tracks on the pavement behind her, and she chose that they should appear to be the tracks of a man."

"Maybe that's the reason why she made no effort to efface them."

"It is exactly the reason. As a matter of fact, she really preferred that they should be found, and I should not be at all surprised if ultimately—if we ever know the truth about this affair—we will find that the shoes which the murderer wore over her own belonged in fact to the person she expected to entice here in search of her victim, and upon which she arranged that the death-trap should fall."

"It's a wonderful man ye are, Misther Caarter," muttered Clune, from his place over at the door.

But the detective paid no heed to what he said. He was already pointing out certain marks on the carpet around the vicinity of the easy chair that stood at the head of the couch.

"If you will notice carefully, McGarrity," he said, "you will see where a woman has passed to and fro several times around the head of this couch. You can see the imprint of very small, feminine feet in the plush of the carpet where the dust of five years has acted something as any fine powder might have done. You will see where she has ultimately dropped into that chair to rest, and that while she sat there she frequently crossed one leg over the other while she was engaged in smoking a cigarette. And all this happened after the murder was committed, too—and after she had moved the body of her victim from this couch to the sleepy-hollow chair, where it now is."

CHAPTER V.

THE SCIENCE OF TWO PLUS TWO.

Nick Carter was silent for a moment, while the two policemen waited respectfully for him to continue, for both were elated and delighted to be in his company, and for once at least to observe him at work.

"Sit down for a moment, boys," said the detective then. "It sometimes is of great assistance to me if I go carefully over the subject matter of a case, in one-sided conversation with others; so I will tell you the story here as I see it.

"First, then, we have to work with the following facts:

"The dead body of a murdered young woman is discovered in this house, which has been vacant—or, rather, which has been untenanted—for about five years.

"Outside the house there is a chained and locked iron gate, and there is a winding path from the gate to the entrance to the house of about forty feet in extent, from gate to door.

"During the early part of the evening it snowed. The character of the snow was soft and gentle; the snow itself was damp; there was no wind with it.

"At or very near the hour of midnight the snow ceased to fall; the stars came out; the night was clear.

"Between the iron gate and the door of the house we find marks of footprints. They appear to have been made respectively by a man and a woman; and we assume that those footprints were made there after the hour of midnight, or at least not many minutes before that time—for if they had been made earlier than that the falling snow would have obliterated them—or at least would partly have done so.

"The strange thing about the footprints consists of the fact that it at first appears as if neither of the parties had left the house after entering it; but a closer examination of them discloses that one of the two did return; that that one appears to have been the man; and that in returning great care was taken to walk backward and to step exactly in the old tracks.

"When this discovery is made it becomes almost certain that foul play has been done inside of this deserted house.

"Entering it, we find the body of a murdered woman; we find that the murderer has gone about the work of killing the victim as deliberately as the butcher for a public market; we find likewise that the murderer as well as the victim is a woman.

"Having discovered these few facts, which are incontrovertible, we begin to construct a foundation for all that must have occurred in this house in order to have resulted in the few facts we have already unearthed.

"We now begin to indulge in the exercise of our creative faculties. Some would say that we indulge in surmise, but, as I mentioned a few moments ago, if one is always careful to put two and two together it will inevitably make four. Two plus less than two or plus more than two will never accomplish the desired result.

"For a known effect there is always a cause; and in analyzing the effect one may approach quite nearly to the logical cause. For example, let me call your attention to the death-trap that was set there by the murderer to catch some person as yet unknown to us. It is getting a trifle ahead of my story, but I may as well refer to it at once.

"I became, in a measure, a victim of the death-trap. The weight, arranged for another person, fell upon me. It knocked me down; it stunned me; when I recovered I examined into the methods that had been employed in creating the trap.

"A heavy iron bar, such as is called a crowbar, was

suspended in the middle of the room by a single thread that was just strong enough to hold it. The thread was passed through a screw-eye fastened in the ceiling of the room—and the ceiling is approximately twelve feet from the floor.

"I am citing this, McGarrity, in order to demonstrate to you how the study of an effect will point at a cause. There is nothing within this room which is of sufficient height to enable any person who is standing upon it to attach a screw-eye to the ceiling, and therefore it at once becomes apparent to a sane mind that a step-ladder must have been employed. Feeling assured of that much, I search in the nap of the carpet directly beneath the screw-eye for the marks of the step-ladder—and I find them.

"This is a very simple proposition, of course, and I cite it merely to show you the process of deduction. I shall refer to others presently which will not be so apparent, but you will understand from this one the methods employed in the general summary that I am about to make.

"Now, to return to the point of beginning

"We are compelled to assume that the young woman who is now a corpse came to this house with her murderer of her own free will—that she came here quite willingly. Why? Because the character of the tracks in the snow obviate any idea or suggestion of compulsion; that is to say, of physical force. It is quite true that intense moral suasion amounting almost to force may have been used.

"We must also assume that she came here with a person who was well known to her, and also one in whom she had confidence. That she did come here willingly sufficiently establishes that point.

"Again, we are compelled to assume that the murdered woman was—or had lately been—ill. We——"

"Will you please tell me why you assume that, sir?" asked McGarrity.

"Yes; but hereafter you must not interrupt me. I assume that she was ill or that she was far from strong as the result of a recent illness, because the position of the footprints in the snow indicate that she was in a large measure supported by her companion while they walked together; because as soon as she was inside this room she went directly to that couch and reclined upon it, and because she was immediately given a glass of the port wine from that decanter on the sideboard. Her companion, the murderess, also poured out a glass for herself—but she did not drink it all. And here is another point. That wine has not been in the decanter all these years that the owners or tenants of this house have been absent, nor was it brought here to-night; so it follows that the murderer had already brought it here and left it here in preparation for the visit that was made this night."

"But that would suggest——"

"Never mind now what it would suggest. I will come to that later on."

"Excuse me, sir."

"Next we ask ourselves, what could have induced a young lady who was ill or who had lately been ill to visit this deserted house in the dead of night, with one companion, and that one a woman? The answer is obvious."

"It may be so, sir, but I will confess that I don't see it."

"She expected to meet another person here when she arrived. That is the answer."

"But, sir——"

"If you will endeavor to remain silent I will continue. Otherwise I will cease."

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Carter. I am greatly interested, and that fact leads me to forget myself."

"I suppose it does. We must not forget that we are in the heart of a great city; that this house is an old landmark, and that it is generally known to have remained unoccupied, save by furniture, during almost five years; that the gate was chained and locked; that the murderer—or the girl who was murdered—possessed a key to that lock and also to the house; and that she—the dead girl—must have known that the person whom she expected to meet here also possessed keys which were duplicates of hers. Have you got those suggestions in your mind, McGarrity?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then let me ask you this question, just to see what your reply will be: Who would be most likely to possess such keys?"

"Why, the people who last lived in this house, of course."

"Not necessarily. You have a little less than your second 2 with which to make your plus of 4 in that case. For example, the keys have been left with relatives, with caretakers, with an agent, or with relatives. It is quite certain, however, that they were the original keys.

"And now, for a moment, we must put ourselves in the place of the dead girl, and look at the circumstances as she viewed them. We observe readily enough from the general appearance of her dress that she was well-to-do, presumably rich; and that she was refined, delicate, modest—and doubtless good. There is no wedding-ring on the marriage finger, but you have noticed that there are other rings, and valuable ones at that, have you not?"

"Yes."

"Very well; there is something in connection with those rings which you probably did not notice."

"What is that, sir?"

"The three rings now on her fingers were not her own; or at least, if they were, she was not in the habit of wearing them daily; *but*, strangely enough, there is a ring missing from her left hand which she was in the

habit of wearing constantly, and *that ring has disappeared.* Moreover, that ring that is missing was a wedding-ring."

"How——"

"I discovered those facts from the appearance of her fingers. The rings she now wears are rather tight. Had she worn them constantly there would have remained the marks of them under the gold. Those marks are not there, but my glass has revealed the existence of other marks which show where the present rings were crowded upon her fingers after her death. But, again, on the third finger of the left hand there is plainly the traces of a wide gold band or wedding-ring that she has worn there constantly for a considerable length of time—and also there are traces of talcum powder, employed by the murderess in removing the ring from the dead hand. In that we have still another evidence of the cold-blooded preparation that was made in anticipation of this crime.

"To return; we put ourselves in the place of the dead woman when she was induced to consent to come here as she did.

"We now know that she was a married woman; we know that she was wealthy, refined, modest, and presumably a good woman. We judge that she was in some way related to the woman fiend who killed her. We know that she—or the murderer—possessed the necessary keys to enter this house and the gate that leads to it. We have already judged that the person she was assured would meet her here also had the necessary keys. Now, put yourself in her place and ask of yourself: What manner of argument and circumstance could have induced you to come here under such conditions, at such a time, and in the weak condition of her system?

"The answer is: First, the person she expected to meet here was a near relative. It might have been a husband or a brother. Second, they both possessed the right to visit this house. That is, they had lived here; they owned it; or they were in some manner responsible for it. Third, one of the parties to that meeting—and probably the man who was expected—was, as a crook would say, keeping under cover. We will assume that we refer now to the man who was expected, and so we must conclude that for some reason he did not dare to be seen abroad in the daylight. Fourth, we must assume that it was the only place where, the only time when, and the only circumstance under which the man would consent to see the woman who was killed; that is, this house, at midnight or near it, and in the company of the person who brought her here—or *alone.* I am inclined to think that she was expected to come alone."

"May I interrupt you a moment?" asked McGarrity.

"Yes. What is it?"

"If there was an appointment for the murdered woman to meet a man here, as you suggest, and which seems very likely, how is it that that other person has not appeared? If that trap was deliberately set for a certain individual, why has that individual not appeared? If such a person is expected, is it not likely that he may show up at any moment, and ought we not to be prepared to receive him when he does come? Is it not more than likely that if we had that person here now we would be able to extract from him information which would lead to the capture of the murderer of this young woman?"

"You have asked four questions instead of one, but I will reply to them."

"Please."

"The reply will take me from my original text for a moment, but I will return to it later. Now, listen."

CHAPTER VI.

THEORIES BY DEDUCTION.

"The person who was expected to appear here, and for whom the death-trap was set, has not yet arrived upon the scene for the reason that the hour for the appointment—as he understood it—has not yet arrived. The reason for that is that the appointment was made with him, not by the woman who was murdered, but by the woman who killed her, and the hour was purposely fixed by her for a time *after* the murder should have been committed. Daylight is upon us now, and so we may assume that the expected person will not come until—well, until the coming midnight.

"That seems to reply to three of your questions. As for the fourth, I answer, Yes; and we will be prepared to receive him when he does come. Now let us return again to the subject that is directly in hand."

"Yes, sir."

"A very strong inducement must have been used to convince the woman who was murdered of the expediency of this visit to this house; hence we conclude that the man she was to meet—or believed she was to meet, would be better—was her brother, or husband."

"Why not her father?"

"That is possible. I am inclined to think that she came here to meet her husband. I have serious doubt if any other consideration would have brought her here under the circumstances and in the weakened condition of her health."

"You speak as if you had seen her."

"I see her now. I know that she rested herself upon that couch as soon as she entered this room; there are the marks where her dainty feet, with some snow still clinging to the soles of her shoes, rested while she was lying there on her back, at full length; and here is a stray hairpin from her head which became loosened and fell upon the couch while she was lying there.

"I know that she was weak and faint from the exer-

tion of coming here, and that port wine was administered to her.

"I know that the port wine was placed in the decanter many days ago—several at least—in the expectation of her coming and with the foreknowledge that it would be required; and this is another argument to prove that she had lately been ill. The woman who brought her here, being aware of it, and knowing that she would require stimulant as soon as she arrived, prepared herself in advance for the occasion.

"I know that it was on the occasion of that other visit to this house by the murderer that the screw-eye was fastened in the ceiling and the thread was arranged for sustaining the crowbar over her dead body like a sword of Damocles."

"May I inquire how you know that?"

"I know it because the marks of the step-ladder that was used on that occasion have almost disappeared; because the imprint of a woman's foot almost obliterates one of those marks; because of the step-ladder's being employed as late as a few hours ago—which must have been the case had the death-trap been prepared in entirety after the murder was committed—the marks of it would have been deeper and more plainly to be seen upon the plush of the carpet; because the marks made by the step-ladder when the murderer dragged it across the floor in bringing it into this room and removing it have the same general characteristics—those of being old; and I know it because that heavy iron bar and the smaller steel jimmy have been lying side by side on the carpet under the couch for several days. If you will look here you will find the marks of them plainly apparent.

"I know also that on the occasion of that other visit this murderous woman who went about the preparations for her crime with such masterly method and with such coolness and precision—I know that on the occasion of that other visit she also prepared for our inspection—or for the inspection of others—that tray of half-smoked cigars which we discovered on the table in the other room; and I know it because no two of the stumps of cigars are tooth-marked alike. Every one of them has been smoked by a different person, and one of them still bears the dust marks of the street upon it, indicating that they were all picked up at random and preserved for the uses to which they were applied—all save one."

"And that one——"

"Is the cigar that was lighted, smoked for a moment, and then put down over the edge of the table."

"You think she prepared that one herself?"

"Yes. There is not a tooth mark upon it. She lighted it and smoked it for a moment or two, just as she would have lighted and smoked a cigarette—that is, she held it between her lips and did not touch it with her teeth at all. The end of that cigar was not and had not been moistened.

"Again, among those several bits of cigars there are no two that were originally of the same make or brand. If a man had smoked them while seated in that chair he would have taken them from a box or from his pocket, and in either case they would originally have been out of the same box—or at least two or more of them would."

"Sure thing. I see that point all right. When a man buys cigars he doesn't take a selection of samples from the show-case. But what I cannot understand is why she should take all that trouble to put them there at all."

The detective smiled broadly.

"That is the easiest of all questions to answer," he said.

"Why, then?"

"The partly smoked cigars were placed there, the papers were scattered on the floor there, the opened book turned face down there, were all arranged by the murderer for the purpose of further deceiving the woman she intended to kill; for the purpose of quieting her fears when she arrived here, and to use as an evident proof that the man whom the murdered girl expected to meet was in the habit of coming here. That is all."

"Just to give her confidence, eh?"

"That is it. Simply to impart confidence; to allay her fears; to make her content to lie down on the couch to rest and wait until the man should arrive; to convince her that there had been no mistake in coming here, and to render her all the more easily the murderer's victim."

"It seems incredible, doesn't it?"

"Almost."

The detective hesitated a moment, and then he said:

"Imagine for a moment that you see the two women approaching the gate, along the street. You can see the intended murderess as she glances furtively in every direction in order to discover if they are noticed, while all the time she talks volubly to her companion, who is soon to die.

"Doubtless she is assuring her of the necessity for using great caution in approaching the gate. As they draw nearer to it she produces the key or takes it from the hand of her companion.

"Possibly they walk past the gate once, or twice, or thrice, before the murderess essays to open it.

"The girl who leans upon her arm is weak; she is almost fainting from weakness, from apprehension and from fright.

"They pass through, and the murderess replaces the chain and the lock as deftly as she can, but she does not snap the lock. Then she supports her companion into the house.

"When they enter through the door the murderess closes and fastens it carefully behind her, after which she leads her victim into that front room and strikes a

match—then another, and then another. You will find all three of them on the carpet in the front room, at different distances between the two doors.

"By the light of those matches she discloses the presence of the half-smoked cigars; of the open book; of the papers, which, by the way, are all of the same date, and were purchased four days ago—three days ago from yesterday—and were never read by anybody at all."

"But that tells us, does it not, what day the woman came here to prepare for the commission of the murder?"

"Certainly. Four days ago. Tuesday."

"And what happened next, Mr. Carter? It is almost as if I could see it."

"The murderess leads her intended victim into this room. One can almost hear her affirm that the expected third party to the meeting should be there at almost any moment. She leads her victim directly to this couch. She assists her in lying down upon it; and then—can't you hear her exclaim:

"'Ah! Here is a decanter with something in it. I will see what it is. It is port that *he* has provided. I will give you some;' etc., etc.

"After that the woman watches for her opportunity. I know by the appearance of the decanter that considerably more wine was taken from it than would fill those two glasses, and so it is evident that she induced the woman on the couch to repeat the dose two or three times.

"Port wine is heavy. It rendered the prospective victim sleepy. She drowsed. She dozed. After a while doubtless she actually slept.

"All this time the murderess was passing up and down in front of the couch and around to that end of it where her victim's head was nearest to her. It was directly under that part of the couch where the iron crowbar and the steel jimmy were concealed.

"When the intended victim slept the rest was easy.

"The murderess had only to stoop and possess herself of the jimmy, which is not so heavy but that she could handle it easily.

"Step over here nearer the corpse. So. Here is where the first blow must have fallen—directly downward across the center of the forehead. That blow killed the woman on the couch, and if mere death were all that was desired the murderess might have desisted then and there; but it was not enough.

"For some reason which I cannot now explain it was necessary that the face of the victim should be beaten to a pulp. That is, either there was a definite reason for placing the victim beyond the pale of recognition, or else the excitement of committing a murder beget a fiendish impulse in the woman who did the killing which led her to strike and strike and to strike again long after the woman on the couch was dead.

"It is probable that there was a reason for the act, since it appears that the murderess was perfectly cool after the crime was committed."

"Why do you suppose that?"

"Because she seated herself in that chair at the head of the couch and remained there while she smoked a cigarette. The ashes of it are on the carpet and the half-smoked butt of it is in the grate. She may have helped herself to more wine, or it is possible that she did not take any wine at all until then.

"After she had rested and recovered her composure she went about the remainder of her work deliberately."

"And what was that?"

"She drew the iron bar from beneath the couch. She found the end of the thread—which three nights or days before she had passed through the screw-eye and otherwise made ready—and she carried it around the leg of the table and then she led the end of it across the room a few inches above the floor and tied it to the grate.

"After that she had only to pass the heavy bar through the two loops of the inverted Y and to balance it nicely and with care. More than likely she had already tested the strength of the thread and knew that it would sustain the weight."

"The trap was now set."

"But the body of the murdered girl was still on the couch."

"Exactly. She wheeled the sleepy-hollow chair to the side of the couch; you can see the marks on the carpet where she did that. After that she had only to lift the corpse into the chair, and then to wheel the chair back again to its place beside the table; you can see the deeper mark made by the casters of the chair when it contained the weight of the corpse. You can see the spattering of blood at the head of the couch and on the floor near there. You can see the whole dreadful tragedy just as it was enacted here in this room less than six hours ago."

"And then? What then?"

"Why then she hoped that the man who was expected here to meet them by that poor murdered girl would be struck down, as I was struck down, by the falling bar; and that if it did not kill him, it would at least place him in the light of having committed the murder."

CHAPTER VII.

THE LISTENER IN THE FRONT ROOM.

"I see only one objection to that last idea," said McGarrity, "if you will permit me to mention it."

"Certainly. That is what I wish you to do."

"If she had any idea that the person who was to come here would be charged with the murder, why did she take the weapon with which the deed was actually committed out of the house with her, and why did she throw it away as soon as she had passed through the gate?"

"I see that you have not examined this crowbar very carefully," replied Nick, with a smile.

"No, I have not."

"Look at it now. Tell me what you see on it."

"Why, there are marks of blood on it, almost its entire length."

"Exactly. Well?"

"I do not understand."

"It is very simple. Don't you see that here there are some bits of hair clinging to it also?"

"Yes."

"And do you remember that only a short time ago I asked you to look at your hands and you did so and found blood on them?"

"Yes."

"You got more of it from this crowbar than from the jimmy."

"But still I do not understand."

"Almost all the pounding upon the murdered woman's face after she was dead was done with the heavier crowbar. The chief idea in that was, I think, to cover it with blood and hair in order to make it appear that it was the original and the only instrument of murder; and you will please take notice that it is so heavy that only a man could wield it; a woman could not do so; would not have the strength to do so."

"I realize that all right."

"Now I will pass to the jimmy for a moment, after which I will return to the crowbar again and have a little more to say about the aspect of that."

"Yes, sir."

"Having made it appear that the crowbar was the instrument of murder, and being in all respects prepared to leave the house, *she realized that she must take the jimmy with her for the reason that it was necessary that the crowbar should be the only weapon present in the room with which the terrible crime might have been committed.*"

"Well?"

"She remembered the snow on the walk outside the house. She remembered that she had closed the gate, replaced the chain and lock, and that it would require two hands—both her hands—to remove that chain and lock so that she could pass out. You must not forget that she had already determined to walk backward to the gate, stepping in her old tracks."

"I remember that."

"Walking backward in that uncertain light, and at the same time stepping in the tracks she had made on entering the front dooryard, was rather a difficult thing to do. Her hands and arms must necessarily be free in order that she might use them in balancing herself and also in unfastening the gate, which she would be compelled to do with her hands behind her."

"I don't see how she could have carried it at all in that case."

"She tied it around her waist with more of the thread—the same thread she had used—that is to say, it came from the same spool—in setting her trap. If you will look at the end of the mantel over there you will find the spool and you will discover that there is blood upon it, showing that she handled it after the murder was committed; *and her former uses for that thread occurred before there was blood here to stain it.*"

"I understand now. You mean——"

"I mean that she had no means of carrying that jimmy away with her other than by tying it to her waist with the thread. Her hands she was obliged to use. She had to pass out as I have described; she had to unfasten the gate, pass through it, close it, and replace the chain and snap the lock into place."

"I see. Yes, sir."

"But you wonder why she threw the jimmy away, I suppose."

"I will confess that I do."

"She did not throw it away. She lost it."

"Ah!"

"McGarrity, nine persons out of ten, be they men or women, after having committed a crime of this sort or of any sort, and after leaving a house as this woman left it, would follow one plan as soon as the sidewalk was reached."

"What would that be, sir?"

"They would cross the street to the opposite side at once."

"Bedad, I think you're right about that."

"I am sure I am. Now, I think if you will examine carefully when you go outside you will find that she did that very thing. You will find traces in the snow to prove that she crossed the street; and I think that when she stepped from the curb into the gutter the jimmy slipped through the loops which confined it and fell to the ground on the snow. If so, the snow deadened the sound of its fall and she was too greatly absorbed in her haste to get away from the spot to notice the absence of its weight at once. When she did so it was gone, and she had no idea where she had dropped it. It was too late to turn back to look for it. That, I think, is how it happens that you found the jimmy where you did."

"You said that you had something more to say about the crowbar."

"So I have. Has it occurred to you that there was only about one chance in ten thousand that the falling bar would kill the person it struck against?"

"Yes."

"But that, on the other hand, there is every chance that it would act just as it acted in my case?"

"Yes, sir."

"It is evident to me that she was shrewd enough to realize all that. She did not expect to kill the man who was struck by the bar; she was not even sure that he would be stunned?"

"What then?"

"Her idea was to *mark* him."

"To mark him?"

"Yes—with a bruise; with a contusion."

"But why should she care to do that?"

"Why? Because she figured that as soon as he realized the awful thing that had happened in this room his first impulse would be to rush out of the house in search of aid. Imagine what you would do, McGarrity, if while passing this house, day or night, a man should rush out of it and almost into your arms, crying out 'Murder! Murder!' Consider that his face was streaming with blood; that there was a cut or a bruise on his head; that you should drag him into this room with you and discover that body as we found it; that you should see the blood-stained crowbar—would you believe the story that the man would tell you? Would you believe that he had just entered the house, only to find that the murder had been committed before he arrived? Particularly would you believe it in the face of the silent evidence of the footprints in the snow? Would you believe it at all, or would you place the man under arrest at once?"

"By thunder, I'd arrest him."

"Of course you would. And now, suppose you should find later that the man you had arrested was a fugitive from justice for any cause whatever—I believe him to be that, according to my deduced theories—suppose you should discover that there were other charges against him? Suppose it should develop—as I think it will—that the dead woman was his wife and that they had lived apart for one reason or another for some time? Would you not require a great deal to convince you of his innocence?"

"Bedad, I would that."

"Sure you would. Therein lies all the cleverness of this woman devil. Therein lies the only explanation of her reasons for conducting her murderous operations in exactly the manner she did."

"Misther Caarter, sure I taake off me hat to ye," said Clune, who all this time had been a silent and an amazed listener.

"All right, Clune," replied Nick, smiling. "And now to continue; that is, to sum up."

"Yes, sir."

"If I am right at all, the dead woman was a married woman. At home she has a young baby—a child that is probably a few weeks old. For some reason she has become separated from her husband. I think that he is a fugitive from justice, or that he is at least compelled to keep out of the way for the present. The time and place of the meeting suggests that, as I have said before.

"The baby has been born since she saw her husband; he has never seen it——"

"But why do you suppose that she had a young baby at all, sir?"

"Because of her weakened physical condition and of her great strength of purpose in coming to this deserted house at the time she did and in the manner she did; and there are other reasons which I think the coroner will tell you after he has made an examination. To be plain, the dead woman's breast suggests to me in one of her physique that she is nursing a babe."

"Yes, sir."

"The husband has never seen the baby. No matter what has happened to separate the two—the man and wife—the birth of the child revives her love for its father. She not only consents to come here to meet him and to tell him about the child, but she is anxious to do so.

"There is a mutual friend—the woman who committed the murder.

"Now, right here my theories are at fault. I cannot conceive why that woman should attempt to destroy the man as well as the woman unless there is a property consideration somewhere; an inheritance, or something like that.

"It is certain, however, that she does wish them both out of the way. She is willing to murder the woman, and she is satisfied to have the man accused of the murder of his wife.

"She lays out her plans with devilish ingenuity. We will go down-stairs and up-stairs in the house presently, and we will discover—I think—where she got the step-ladder, the wine, and the crowbar."

"And the jimmy?"

"No; I give that up. That is another thing which my theorizing has not attempted to explain. It is the one entirely foreign element in this case."

"Unless the husband—you suggested that he is a fugitive from justice—is a burglar."

"No. I don't think that at all. I won't try to explain the presence of the jimmy."

"Possibly the woman who did the killing brought it here with her."

"I think it more than likely that she did so."

"Well, sir, it that all?"

"Not quite. We have yet to consider the coming of the man who was to be accused of the murder."

"Do you mean that you still believe that he will come here?"

"Yes."

"Might he not have come and gone since we have been here?"

"It is possible, but I do not think so. I think that he

would be about due here at midnight to-night. However, there are the tracks in the snow to consider. The woman intended something by them—something that does not appear on the surface."

"What do you say, Mr. Carter, if I go to the door and have a look at the snow? It is daylight now, and you know we kept away from those tracks when we entered here."

"I will go with you," replied Nick, rising.

The detective started to his feet and crossed the room toward the door; but even as he did so he was conscious of a rush of feet through the front room. A chair was overturned in the flight of some person who had been listening there; and then an instant later they all three heard the front door slam shut with a loud bang; and the sound of a key as it grated in the lock made it instantly evident to the detective that the expected guest had been there—and that he had escaped.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE HOUSE OF THE MURDERER.

That front door—like all front doors of city houses—closed with a latch, but there was of course another lock underneath this one, and it was the key to that which the flying man had used in fastening the door more securely against pursuit.

It must not be forgotten that the house had been closed for years; that the windows were boarded up securely, and that this front door was the only available means of entrance or egress there.

And now with that locked on the outside—well, the fact acted as a complete bar to immediate pursuit.

It is true that locks hold but few terrors for the detective; that with his magic little instrument invented by him for the purpose he could pass through almost any door, no matter how complicated the lock might be; but nevertheless the simplest of locks required time to work their tumblers.

So that now, although the detective drew his pick-lock from his pocket and had it ready for use in his hand by the time he reached the door, there were nevertheless some few seconds passing while he was busily engaged in unlocking the same—and the result was that when he did succeed in throwing it open and dashing outside, the dooryard and the street itself was as deserted as it had been in the middle of the night.

The morning was bright and clear and cold, for the temperature had materially changed since the three men had been inside the house.

On the snow in the pathway which led around the old fountain to the gate the detective could plainly see the footprints of the person who had been eavesdropping while he was theorizing upon the murder, and Nick noted even as he sprang headlong to the gate in order to gaze up and down the street that they were not the footprints of a man.

He suspected that the intruder had had sufficient time to make good the escape so carefully planned, and one glance up and down the street convinced him that it was useless to attempt to follow the fugitive.

The two policemen were directly behind him, and he motioned them back into the house, but pointing out the new footprints in the snow as he did so.

"You see," he said, as they returned to the back room where so much had happened, "it is utterly impossible always to conjecture correctly what another person may do. Now I would have said that the murderer would have put as much distance as possible between herself and the house where she has committed her crime; but——"

"What!" exclaimed McGarrity. "Do you think that it was the woman who——"

"Surely."

"And not the expected one, eh?"

"No. It was the murderer returned—I think."

"But why? Why should she return here? I confess that I cannot think that she would dare to do that."

"But you saw the footprints, did you not?"

"Sure I did?"

"And did you not also recognize them? But I forgot that you have not studied these marks on the carpet as I have done. Now, Clune!"

"Yes, sir."

"I will ask you to go at once to the station-house and make your report about this thing."

"Yes, sir."

"Tell the sergeant—or the captain, if he is there—that I happened along just as you made the discovery that somebody had entered this house, and that I took charge of the case from that moment. Tell the entire story in as few words as possible, just as you know it."

"I will, sir."

"If the captain is not there, ask that he step around here as soon as he arrives; also request the sergeant to send around two men to stand guard and keep out the curious ones, for it will not be long before the news of the murder gets noised abroad, and there will be hundreds clamoring around the gate."

"But," interposed the roundsman, "I thought that you intended to lay a trap for the capture of that man who was expected here, and——"

"That would be useless now, McGarrity. The man will not come now."

"Why not? You say that the one who was just here was the murderer returned, and not the person who was expected here and for whom the murderer set the trap."

"That is correct. But, all the same, the murderer has discovered enough from our conversation, which she overheard, to know that her plans have all gone awry.

The same care which she exercised recently to induce that unknown to come here will now be employed to warn him to keep away. No; my carelessness in permitting her to enter here and listen to what we were saying has altered the entire aspect of the case. Now, Clune!"

"Yes, sir."

"Get along and do as I have directed—and tell the sergeant that I will want the coroner here just as soon as it is possible. Make that most emphatic, please. Now, go."

Clune went out immediately, and the instant he was gone the detective said to the roundsman:

"How much more time have you before you must report at the station-house?"

"Half-an-hour, sir."

"Then you can go over the house with me if you like. We will close and fasten the doors of this room, and we will relock the outer door. We should be through with our examination before anybody gets here from the station-house."

There was only half a basement, so to speak, to that house. That was at the rear, under an extension which had been included in the plans for the accommodation of a dining-room with a kitchen under it, and a commodious and beautiful sleeping-room over it.

The detective led the way first to the basement kitchen; and there they found the step-ladder which has been so frequently mentioned.

It had been placed against the wall just inside the kitchen door.

On the table was a lidless cigar-box, and this contained a miscellaneous collection of tacks, nails, screws, screw-eyes, etc., from among which the murderer had selected the one screw-eye that had been used in the manufacture of the death-trap.

Near this was a recently opened port-wine bottle, from which the liquor had been decanted for use in the library, and beside it was a corkscrew with the cork still fast to it.

McGarrity smelled at the neck of the bottle and then examined the surroundings with manifest contempt.

"One would have supposed," he muttered, "that the lousy would have taken the bottle upstairs with her, or at least have returned the cork to it. It's a shame to ruin wine like that, Mr. Carter."

"All of which goes to prove that the person who opened that bottle is not accustomed to handling port wine," replied the detective. "Or at least that she does not care for it. I am beginning to be of the opinion that the murderer was rather more fond of whisky. Look yonder."

In one of the recently opened whisky bottles stood an ordinary table spoon, and near them was a sugar-bowl half filled and a tumbler with a spoon standing in it. Inside the tumbler were the dregs of whisky and sugar, still moist from recent use, and one of the bottles was still two-thirds full of the liquor.

"It begins to look as if some person has been a frequent visitor to this place, in spite of my original thoughts on the subject," mused the detective aloud. "Let us see what is in here."

He opened a door which led them toward the front of the building as he spoke. And they passed into a sort of half-basement under the front of the house, which had evidently been used as a wine-cellar.

It was at once evident where the supplies on the table had come from, for the wine-cellar was well stocked. One might have demanded almost any sort of beverage there and have found it ready for the asking; and there were casks as well as cases and bottles in the place.

Nick indicated a spot on the floor in one corner of the cellar.

"There is where the crowbar has stood, doubtless for years," he said. "But that is only a detail. The revelation that we do find here—and which is most important—is that this house, notwithstanding its appearance and the belief of the police, has been in constant use for some time. Unless I am greatly mistaken, we will discover other revelations of the same sort somewhere above the main floor. Come. There is no more to be learned here."

They made their way back again to the main floor, but did not pause there, for the detective led the way at once to the wide stairway which ascended to the second floor.

It must be borne in mind that the house, although deserted, was fully furnished; that its every aspect suggested that the former occupants had left it at a few moments' notice, and had abandoned everything in just the conditions under which they had used them.

It was not surprising, therefore, when, upon entering the room over the parlor, they discovered every appearance of recent occupancy save for the one fact that a fine and impalpable dust had collected upon everything there.

The detective bestowed merely a glance upon this room; then he closed the door again and retreated.

There were four other rooms on that floor, and they were all in about the same condition; but on the third floor there was at once discovered a difference.

The first room they entered—it was the one directly over that in which the murder had been committed, although separated from it by an intervening story—gave ample evidence not only of recent but of constant occupancy.

It is true that the windows were boarded up, and that in addition to that every crack and crevice through which a ray of light might by any possibility penetrate had been packed tightly with cotton wadding; yet the room had the atmosphere of occupancy, and an oil stove

near the open grate in the chimney suggested that the person who frequented the place did not suffer with the cold.

There were pictures on the walls; ornaments reposed on the mantel and tables; there were books on the shelves; a student-lamp stood upon a small table near the bed, and the bed itself was rather roughly made up, with the covers partly turned back ready for use. A wide, soft lounge stood between the windows, and there was a sofa pillow at one end of it, which still bore the indentation of a head that had rested upon it, while a New York *Herald* of the preceding Sunday was scattered upon the floor near-by.

"Stand right where you are and don't move until I tell you to do so," ordered the detective of his companion. "Although there is a student lamp over there on that table, I still think that the gas is practicable, as a theatrical man would say."

And it was.

The detective lighted the gas, after which his first care was to examine the bureau drawers; and after that he went rapidly from one place to another in the room, never uttering a word while he was at work.

The sofa pillow was the last thing to which he gave his attention, but he devoted a great deal to it, using his glass with more than usual care.

"Come," he said at last. "We will get back downstairs now," and he summarily turned out the gas and led the way out of the room.

"There are some rather remarkable features to this case," he said to his companion, when they were seated and awaiting the arrival of the officers from the station-house.

"I don't think that I was ever so near to bursting open with curiosity as I am at this minute," replied McGarrity.

"No? Well, I don't blame you. That is rather an odd combination of things, in that room up-stairs, McGarrity. In one of the drawers of the chiffonier there is as beautiful a set of burglar's tools as I ever saw in my life; the others—of the chiffonier and bureau both—contain all sorts of wearing apparel, masculine and feminine."

"Masculine and feminine!"

"Yes; masculine and feminine; it is the other way around that bothers me. Besides, that bed was never made up by a woman, was it? It was made by a man, wasn't it? And there were cigarette ashes and stumps galore around the base of the mantel; and there was every sort of masculine attire there, too."

"Well, what did you expect to find, Mr. Carter?" asked McGarrity.

"Eh? Pretty nearly what I did find, if you want the truth," was the reply.

CHAPTER IX.

IT IS A MYSTERY STILL.

An entire week had passed since the discovery of the murder in the deserted house.

During that time, with the aid of his assistants, Nick Carter had been indefatigable in following up every clue that had suggested any likelihood of leading to revelation of the mysteries associated with the murder; but all alike had eventually run up against a dead wall, so to speak—and the mystery remained as much a mystery as ever.

Nor had there been a single discovery in regard to the identity of the murdered woman.

She seemed to have appeared out of the mysteries of the snowy night, only to have been killed. And although since that time the house had not been a moment without watchful eyes fixed upon its approaches the espionage had resulted in nothing.

From the moment of the finding of the dead body until the present time absolutely nothing had occurred in connection with the crime to point to the knowledge of it by another, save that one episode of the coming and going of the mysterious person who had crept so stealthily into the house and listened while Nick was discussing the crime with the two policemen.

The coroner's inquest had merely borne out what Nick Carter had already stated.

The murdered woman had been in a weakened physical condition at the time of her death, and that condition had been the result of the quite recent birth of a child.

Practically that was all that was known about her.

She had been a woman of refinement. Her body was well cared for, delicate and beautiful. Her hands and feet were the extremities of a lady who devoted a great deal of care to her personal health and comfort. Her clothing was rich and of the best, but there had not been discovered upon it a mark of any kind which would assist in leading to the identification of its wearer—and the murdered woman's face had been so terribly disfigured that recognition of the features was out of the question.

The body itself had been exposed at the morgue during all that seven days, and crowds had gone there to view it; also watchful eyes had observed every person who had paused for an instant over the corpse to regard it; but in this case, as in the others, nothing had resulted.

The detective had consumed an entire day in making a careful study of the contents of the house and of that room on the third floor where the evidences of constant occupancy had been so apparent; and he had found only what he had summed up in a few words to McGarrity on that occasion.

And now, after that week of no results, at the close

of the day, Nick Carter with his chief assistant were seated together in Nick's study, discussing the case.

"Chick," said the detective, removing his cigar from his lips and flicking the ashes to one side with studied care, as if the manner in which they would fall upon the receptacle for them was of the utmost importance to what he was about to say, "I have never in all my varied experience run against a case which promised so much at the beginning and developed so little afterward as this one. It is a puzzler from Puzzlerville, and I am glad that you have got home to help me out with it."

By this remark it will be understood that Chick had been absent from the city at the time of the murder and had thus far had no connection with the case, and in fact knew nothing at all about it save what he had read in the papers.

He had only been in the house an hour when Nick called him into the study to talk the case over with him.

"Chick," said the detective again, after a considerable pause, during which he was deciding in his own mind just in what manner he would proceed in discussing the matter with his assistant, "I think I will put you in my own place while we talk, while I act the part of a witness. Just forget that I am your chief and that I am even a detective. Regard me merely as a layman who has inadvertently run upon the fact of the crime and has come here to report it to you."

"What is the idea in doing that?" asked Chick.

"I wish to discover if that subconscious theory of mine does not fit into my own case as well as apply to others."

"I don't think that I quite understand what you mean."

"I mean this: I cannot get it out of my head that somewhere among the clues that I once believed I had picked up about this case the right one exists; only I have not recognized it. I mean that I *do* know and that I *do not know* that I know. Catch on?"

"Well, it is a trifle complex; but I think I understand. You wish me to see if I cannot bring out something by questioning you that you yourself have neglected."

"That's the idea—precisely."

"In the first place, then, I wonder if I correctly understand the beginning of the case."

"I don't know. The papers had it about right."

"Clune found the tracks in the snow, and you discovered Clune before he had done more than gaze at them, eh?"

"Yes. I had been at home all day. I had not been out of the house at all, and just a little before midnight, when I looked out-of-doors and discovered that it was clearing and that the snow had almost stopped, I started out for a walk. My way took me—entirely by accident—past that house, and there I found Clune leaning up against the fence, studying those tracks in the snow."

"After which he boosted you over the fence and you went inside the house to have that suspended crowbar fall upon your noddle and knock you out."

"Precisely."

"How long did Clune stand there like a stoughton bottle before McGarrity came along?"

"An hour and three-quarters."

"And all that time you were unconscious, eh?"

"Why, yes. They found me in that condition when they entered the house. McGarrity sent Clune to the corner for some brandy, and as soon as they poured a little of that down my throat I sat up and took notice."

"I see. Don't you think that you were unconscious rather a considerable time for one who had received nothing more serious than a mere crack on the pate, from which you recovered almost at once as soon as the brandy was administered?"

"I have thought of that, and it does seem so. It is remarkable, but I am convinced that the clue I am seeking does not lie in that direction."

"Are you? Well, I am not. However, it may be as you say. How did you feel when you did come out of the unconscious state?"

"A bit rocky, as I remember it. Somewhat groggy. Weak in the knees and otherwise considerably dazed."

"I don't suppose it occurred to you that you had been—doctored—eh?"

"What's that? Eh?"

"I don't suppose that you have regarded it as possible that you might have breathed a little after that crowbar hit you on the head, and that while you were doing that somebody held an uncorked phial under your nose?"

"No. I have not. How would that have been possible. The house—— *Say, Chick!*"

Chick was smiling, well pleased with what he had already accomplished.

"Well?" he remarked in reply.

"I should not at all wonder if you have hit the nail on the head, first crack," said the detective, without any excitement in his manner or in his voice, but with a tone of conviction that expressed a great deal. "However, you just go on with your line of questions. Regard me as a stupid fellow who ought at this moment to be studying the addition and multiplication tables. What next, lad? You are interesting me already."

"Your own theory of the case was that one woman had carefully planned to murder another, was it not?"

"Yes."

"And that the plans were carried out with a perfection of detail that was rather startling?"

"There is no doubt about that, whatever."

"Your theory went still farther and included a third person in the plot, didn't it? Ten-Ichi has told me something about it already, on the way from the Grand Central here."

"Yes."

"If Ten-Ichi gave me the correct idea, your entire theory of the case was about this: Or will you state it?"

"No; you do it. I will correct you if you are wrong."

"Very well. A woman plans a murder. She decides to commit it in that house, for reasons which are not apparent. Her victim is a young wife, who has lately given birth to a child. She is also separated from her husband, and has been induced to visit that house in order to have an interview with him. The murderer has made the appointment for her. The victim believes that the appointment is genuine, and goes to the house readily enough. In reality, the theories which you hold maintain that the murderer had summoned the expected third party to come here at another time; he was not expected there at all at the time or near the time of the murder."

"You are stating it correctly. Go on."

"The murderer of the woman desires also to get rid of the husband—if the expected party *is* the husband; and accordingly she builds a very complicated trap in which to catch him. That is, she does not lie in wait in the house to kill him—as she might very readily have done, as you will admit—but she arranges with a great deal of trouble a complex affair of crowbar, screw-eye and thread which is calculated to fall upon him and knock him out—as it knocked you out."

"Yes." Nick's eyes were glistening now, for he saw the drift of Chick's comments, and he did not disguise the fact that he was already deeply interested.

"According to your idea, the murderer went to that house three days before the night of the murder, and at that time she fixed up the appearance of the front room, with the cigars, the daily papers, and all that; and she also brought the crowbar, the jimmy, the screw-eye, and the wine from the kitchen, in preparation for the night of the murder."

"Yes."

"Then she went calmly away—and waited until the night she did come when she was to conduct the doomed young woman to the house to kill her. That is your idea, isn't it?"

"Yes; and you make it all seem very trivial, somehow, Chick. But go on."

"It now appears as a fact that the house for months has been lived in by an unknown person, who occupied the rear room on the third floor."

"Yes."

"And your theory has it that the person who had been for some time inhabiting that house is in reality the same one with whom the appointment was made for that night?"

"Yes; that had been my idea—until this moment."

Chick smiled again.

"Now, Nick, is it a part of your theory that—but wait. Do you suppose the occupant of that room up-stairs to have been a man?"

"Yes. There were evidences there of the presence of a man, and also of a woman, but I do not think there were two persons. I found more that would indicate the masculine than the feminine, and so I decided that the occupant of the room had been a man who often found it convenient to wear the disguise of a woman."

"Very well; now I will ask that other question. Is it a part of your theory that the murderer did not know that the man—or that any man or any woman—was living in the house? Or is it a part of the theory that she *did* know it, and that she also knew that the steady dweller there would be absent during those three days when the arrangements for the carrying out of her plans were so plainly in evidence? Or is it a part of your theory that the person who lived in the house was not a party to this affair at all, but an utter outsider, and that all the time the murderer was acting in entire ignorance of his—or her—existence? There are three questions, and you may reply to any one of them you choose—or to all of them."

"I think," replied the detective slowly, and smiling as he did so, "that my theory was to the effect that the murderer had no idea that the person she had summoned to the house to meet the woman who was killed resided there. That *was* the theory. It is now, however, exploded."

CHAPTER X.

A TANGIBLE CLUE AT LAST.

"That about completes the theory end of it, doesn't it?" asked Chick.

"Yes."

"And now we will deal with facts, eh?"

"Yes.

"In one of the drawers of the bureau, in the room on the third floor, you discovered a very complete set of burglar tools, didn't you?"

"I did."

"And the woman in the library down-stairs was murdered with a jimmy, wasn't she?"

"Yes."

"Was that jimmy taken from the set of tools that you discovered in the room on the third floor?"

"That is impossible to state. I should say that the jimmy with which the crime was committed was of the same make. There were, in fact, two duplicates of it in the bureau drawer."

"So that if it did belong to the set, there were three jimmies exactly alike in the outfit originally?"

"Yes."

"It is very natural to suppose, is it not, that the jimmy

with which the murder was committed *did* come from that collection in the third-floor room?"

"Yes."

"Then isn't it true, Nick, that one of two things must follow in connection with it?"

Nick laughed aloud. He was so pleased at the turn that the subject had taken, and so delighted with the attitude and shrewdness of his chief assistant, that he replied:

"Look here, Chick. You are conducting this examination now. You go ahead. I am playing the part of the dunce. The fact that I now see through your entire line of questioning does not alter the fact that you have revealed it, and that I did not see it until you did. So go right on in the manner you have pursued thus far. I'm willing to take second place for the present—quite willing."

"Very well, then. Isn't it true that one of two things must follow about that jimmy?"

"Yes; but you state what they are."

"Why, either the murderer did know about the constant occupancy of the house by the person who lived on the third floor—*or* the person who lived on the third floor was the murderer. That is what I mean."

"All right. Go on."

"Are you quite sure, Nick, about that trick of walking backward in the snow?"

"Quite."

"You are positive that the footprints which you first supposed to have been made by a man and which fled from the gate to the house were trodden upon again by the same person in walking to the gate backward, are you?"

"Let us understand each other, Chick. What I am positive about *now* is that *somebody* did walk backward from the door of the house to the gate *after* two persons had entered the house together."

"But that puts a different light on the whole thing."

"Certainly."

"You are by no means certain now that it was the murderer who walked backward to the gate, eh?"

"I won't say that. I am not certain that it was the same person who entered the house in company with the woman who was killed."

"Now, what do you think about that unknown individual who was listening in the front room while you were discussing the crime with the two policemen in the room where the murder was done?"

"You are conducting this examination. I am not. I have told you that before," said Nick, with a smile.

"Do you suppose the listener to have been the individual who lived up-stairs? Do you suppose the individual to have been the murderer? Do you suppose it to have been the same one who had walked backward to the gate?"

"I have been under the impression all along that it was the murderer returned."

"But that was based on the supposition that the murderer *left the house after the commission of the crime*, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

"While now it appears as more than likely that after the killing was done the murderer went quietly up-stairs to that room on the third floor and remained there; and that later he or she came down the stairs again, only to find that there were three men in the library who were engaged in discussing the murder over the body of the dead woman; that the murderer listened until somebody suggested that it would be a good idea to look outside the house, and then decamped, locking the door after himself—or herself—so that you could not readily pursue. That is what appears now, isn't it?"

"It certainly is, Chick. I'm proud of you."

Chick smiled, well pleased by the praise.

"Who, then, do you suppose it was who walked backward to the gate?"

"The woman who brought to the house the woman who was killed after she left it."

Chick beamed with smiles.

"And yet there is an objection to that idea, isn't there?"

"Yes. The new tracks in the snow, made after I—and the two policemen—had gone into it?"

"Exactly. And how do you now account for them?"

"It is very easy to account for them now, Chick."

"But how?"

"By the return of the person who brought the murdered woman there to the house in the first place and who went away, leaving her there after promising to return for her at a certain stated time. She came back to get her, and she had walked around the path all the way to the front door before she discovered the tracks in the snow that were made by Clune, McGarrity and myself—and then she just turned about and fled. That's easy, now."

"It seems to me to be the explanation, Nick."

"It is it without a doubt."

"So we are agreed that the woman who brought the other one to the house was not the murderer or the schemer at all."

"Not at all."

"Instead of that, she was without doubt a servant. Is that your present idea?"

"It is."

"Who took her mistress there because she was ordered to do so?"

"Yes."

"And was sent away with orders to return at a stated time?"

"Precisely."

"And that the real appointment had been made between the two principals to the affair—that is, between the murderer and the murdered woman?"

"Sure thing."

"And now, considering the the fact that you found the marks of a woman's feet left in the dust and the plush of the carpet in the library—since you found them all about the room, and they were always unmistakably small and feminine, and since you now believe that the murderer was in the house all the time and was the person who had occupied that room on the third floor, what is now, in the light of all that, your opinion of the sex of the person who resided in the house, who occupied that room on the third floor, and who owned the burglar's tools?"

"It was a woman, of course."

"And in what light does the creation of that death-trap now stand in your belief?"

The detective lighted a fresh cigar before he replied, and then, crossing his legs and leaning back in his chair, he said slowly:

"I should say now that the murderer intended to leave the house as soon as possible after committing the crime and after other arrangements for leaving had been accomplished. I should say now that she knew exactly at which time the serving woman would return for her mistress, but for reasons of her own the murderer did not care to await that return. I should say that the murderer planned to have her knocked senseless or killed, because she could not afford to wait there to do the killing herself—because it was highly important that she should be somewhere else at about that time."

"Now we are getting at it."

"I should say," persisted Nick, "that the servant, who was probably walking up and down the street or an avenue, waiting for the hour for her return to the house after her mistress, became anxious and went back there before her time—which would account again for the additional tracks in the snow."

"That is the correct idea, I think."

"The murderer probably regarded the serving woman as rather stupid and it is more than likely that she was—or is."

"Was, Nick; but go on."

The detective nodded his head and smiled, and then he continued:

"The murderer knew that the serving woman would run to her mistress the instant she saw that something had happened to her; she knew that in doing so she would disturb the thread which held the crowbar, and that she would at least be knocked down by it. She would also get blood upon her person somewhere. She would also run shrieking from the place, and—well, if the crowbar did not kill her, my original theory would be carried out. The woman would be accused of the crime."

"Pre-cise-ly! And the other woman—the murderer—would doubtless be so situated that she would be able to add materially to the circumstantial evidence against the servant."

"By Jove, Chick!"

"And the other woman—the murderer—went directly from this house to some place where that murdered woman and the servant had lived before they went to the house where the murder was committed."

"Chick, you are a very wise and talented young man."

"Wait, Nick. Don't throw any bouquets at me yet. This is only a theory, and it is no better than your own appeared in the beginning. It is built on nothing more substantial than that one was. It may be as thoroughly at fault."

"I don't think so."

"Now, about the house, Nick."

"Yes."

"What have you discovered about that?"

"Nothing of importance."

"Who owns it?"

"A Captain Chester Mayne, now living in Paris. He is there, too, and has been there ever since he left this country. He lost his wife. She died in that house. He discharged the servants and went away to Europe, and has never returned. But I have been in communication with him by cable, and—well, there is nothing at that end of the matter."

"Had he no sisters, or cousins, or aunts, or anything of the kind, who might have made use of the house in his absence?"

"The question has been asked him, and he knows of nobody who could have procured keys to the place."

"It would not have been a very difficult matter, Nick, to have filed away the original chain and lock from the gate and to have replaced them with others during the five years of the owner's absence, would it?"

The detective started to his feet.

"The lock!" he exclaimed. "There is a clue there, Chick, I verily believe; and what a simple one it is, too! Clune put it in his pocket and gave it to me. I have it here, for the police put a new one on the gate. Let us have a look at it, Chick!"

"Yes. The lock! I should not be surprised if that might give us a clue."

CHAPTER XI.

THE STRANGE OLD MAN IN THE CASE.

It has already been stated in another part of this story that the brass padlock with which the gate was fastened was one of unusual pattern, and that its tumblers were manipulated with a flat key, which the detective had re-

ferred to—judging at the time from the appearance of the keyhole—as rather on the pattern of a Yale.

The lock itself was almost circular in form. That is to say, if it had been composed of one piece it would have had the form of a circle with a diamond-shaped hole above the center.

There was no mark whatever on the lock to denote by whom it was made. It was merely a smooth surface on both sides—nor was there any apparent means of taking it apart.

On the back of it, however, there was a strange inscription, marked there in a crude manner by some sharp instrument which might have been the point of a knife blade, and which, under Nick's magnifying-glass, was discovered to read:

"Don't lose the key."

"That is rather strange," said Chick. "What do you suppose that means?"

"It probably means what it says," was the reply. "Don't lose the key."

"Yes; but——"

"Wait a minute," said the detective. "I have got an idea."

He was busy with a handful of flat keys, trying each one in the lock as he spoke, and the assistant smiled indulgently.

"What is the use in opening the lock now or in discovering a key that will fit it?" he asked. "Why not take a hammer and a cold chisel and break the thing apart? There is probably a mark of some sort somewhere inside of it."

Nick did not reply.

He continued to try the keys, and, finally perceiving that not one of them would so much as penetrate into the lock, he presently threw them all aside and began working upon it with his fingers and hands.

"What is the matter now?" asked Chick.

"Merely this: I don't think that a key is used at all to open this lock."

"No?"

"No; that is what the inscription means. There is no key to lose. Ah! Now how in the world did I do that, do you suppose? Oh! I see."

The lock had sprung open in his hands while he manipulated it, and that had been the cause of his exclamation; and he at once discovered that by pressing with his thumb nail upon a certain spot a spring that was no wider than a thread disappeared and the lock opened.

"So far so good," he mused. "We know now how those people came and went."

"Yes, but what good does that do us?"

"It satisfies our curiosity—and it convinces us that the presence of the owner or of a caretaker of the house was not necessary in this affair. It is as you suggested—the lock was placed on the gate since the departure of the owner, for one of his cables said that he had the key to it in his possession. Now, Chick, we will have that hammer and chisel."

"What are you going to do? Smash it?"

"Yes. Bring me the best and the smallest cold chisel you can find."

The articles were brought to him.

"It is too bad to smash such a beautiful bit of workmanship as that," said the detective, as he searched for a vulnerable spot on the lock, "and I don't suppose that anything will be revealed when we have done so. However, here goes."

Three heavy blows with the mallet in his right hand and the front flew off the lock, leaving the inside of it revealed, and as both detectives bent over the table in order to see the better, a strip of thin paper fluttered out from among the works and fell to the floor.

The detective picked it up hastily and spread it out before him; and this is what he saw written upon it:

"Made by hand, in the year 1903, by Jerrold Chrisholm."

"Now what do you think of that?" asked Nick.

"I think," replied Chick, grinning, for he was getting one back at the detective, "that one Jerrold Chrisholm made the lock."

"Correct. You get first prize. That does not strike you as a usual name, does it?"

"No; it is rather an odd combination."

"That's what I thought. Get the directory."

It was brought and Nick opened the book at the C's. Then he ran his finger down the page and over it, until finally he uttered an exclamation.

"Here we are," he said. "Here is the name—and his trade, too. 'Jerrold Chrisholm, Expert.' Expert about what, I wonder?"

"About locks, probably, Nick."

"Right again. The chap lives at a hotel, too. 'Hotel Danube.' Where is the Hotel Danube, Chick? I never heard of it."

"Fifty-ninth Street. I know where it is. Shall we go there at once?"

"Well, rather."

The detective dropped the lock into one of his pockets and three minutes later they both left the house and hurried toward Fifty-ninth Street.

The Hotel Danube proved to be a small but select apartment-house, with a general dining-room on the ground floor, and to their inquiries at the office they were informed that Mr. Jerrold Chrisholm did live in the house and that he was at that moment in his own apartment, since he had just gone up to it in the elevator.

A ring at his door brought a white-whiskered gentleman to reply.

"Yes," he said, "I am Mr. Chrisholm. Will you enter?"

He conducted the detectives to his parlor, offered them chairs, and then stood waiting to discover their errand.

"I wanted to ask you about this piece of remarkable mechanism, which you made in the year 1903," said Nick, producing the lock.

The old gentleman seized upon it eagerly, uttering a cry of delight as he did so; but in a moment he added in a voice of pain:

"It is broken. You have broken it, sir."

"Yes," replied Nick. "I had to do so in order to discover who made it."

"I made it. I have made many remarkable locks, but I was particularly proud of this one because it was the work of my old age; the last work of the kind I ever did. My eyes have become——"

"To whom and in what manner did you dispose of that lock?" interrupted the detective.

"I did not dispose of it at all. It was stolen from me."

Nick's face fell.

"Stolen?" he repeated after the old man.

"Yes; and by one whom I trusted thoroughly."

The detective's face brightened again.

"Then you know who stole it?" he demanded.

"Certainly I know who stole it. Why do you ask?"

"Because it is important that I should know."

"May I ask why?"

"Tell me first who stole the lock from you—and when it was stolen," said Nick.

"I will tell you absolutely nothing whatever about the lock or its history until you have informed me thoroughly of your reasons for asking the questions," replied the old man firmly.

"I am a detective," replied Nick. "I am Nick Carter. There has been a crime committed, and this lock seems to suggest a possible clue to the perpetrator. That is all."

The old man nodded his head and did not reply.

"Well, sir?" said Nick, after a short pause.

"I had feared as much," said the old man, more to himself than to the detective.

"You will tell me about the lock now, sir?"

"No; I will tell you nothing about it at all."

"But, sir, you possibly do not realize the importance——"

"I realize it only too well."

"Then tell me about the lock."

"No; I will tell you nothing."

"Possibly, my dear sir, a way may be found to compel you to speak."

"Indeed? I do not think so. There is nothing on earth that could compel me to speak if I decided firmly not to do so."

"Won't a little pleading move you?"

"I will consider. Tell me about the crime to which you have referred. It may be that after I have heard all about that—it may be that then I will be disposed to speak. What is the character of the crime?"

"Murder."

"Murder? My God!"

The old man seemed to be greatly moved.

He buried his face in his hands, and his entire body shook with half-suppressed emotion. But after a little he raised his eyes again and asked:

"Who was murdered?"

"A woman," replied Nick laconically.

"Murdered? A woman? Who was she?"

"I do not know."

"Was she young? And beautiful?"

"I have reason to believe that she was both. I know she was young; I believe that she was at least attractive."

"When was she killed?"

"Eleven days ago."

"Where?"

"In a house in Twenty-third Street."

The old man shook his head in evident relief; but he continued his questioning, and Nick decided that it was his own best policy to humor the old chap by answering his questions.

"Who killed her?" the old gentleman demanded.

"I don't know."

"What has this lock to do with the crime?"

"It fastened the gate which opened the way to the house."

"Do you know whether the murder was committed by a man or by another woman?"

It was a strange question for the old man to ask under the circumstances, but the detective concealed his impatience, and replied:

"I am of the opinion that the murder was done by a woman."

"Great Heaven! Is it so?"

"Yes. Remember, however, that I do not know. I only think so."

"You are on the track of the—the murderer?"

"I am."

"And this lock is your only clue?"

"No; it is not the only one. It is one of them."

"You are, however, of the opinion that a knowledge of the history of this lock will facilitate you in your work?"

"I am quite certain of it."

"Will you give me a little time to think it all over to myself, sir? I wish to do that before I decide to answer your questions."

"I would rather you would tell me all that you know about it at once. It will help me very much. Think of it. A great crime has been committed. A young woman

who had only recently given birth to a child has been foully murdered, and——"

"Lately given birth to a child!" shrieked the old man. "Is that true? Are you sure?"

"Yes. It is true."

"Then I will tell you. Yes, I will tell you. I will tell you everything—if I do not die in the agony of it, sir."

CHAPTER XII.

ONE WOMAN'S AWFUL CRIMES.

The old man rose and crossed the room twice. Then he seated himself in a chair directly confronting the detective.

"I will explain the somewhat trivial matter of the lock first," he said. "The telling about it will serve to calm me so that I can relate the remainder of my sad story with something resembling composure at least.

"I have always been a mechanic. My forefathers were mechanics before me, and my talents have ever seemed to turn to the creation of the unusual. That lock, therefore, is merely the result of my play hours. Its manufacture was begun when my eyesight had commenced to fail, and the work was done more for the purpose of satisfying myself that my hands and eyes still retained their cunning than for any other reason.

"So much for that. I made the lock in the year 1903, and I put, as you know, a strip of paper inside it, believing that some day in the far future it would meet the eyes of a mechanic who is as yet unborn, and so, in a measure, perpetuate my fame. I little thought that it would really become the means of my undoing.

"I am a man of considerable wealth, Mr. Carter, although I live here in retirement. I am a man of family, although I live entirely alone, save only for a deaf-and-dumb servant who waits upon me and who has done so since I was a young man. He is very nearly my own age.

"But I have—but, no; it is better that I should speak in the past tense—I had a wife and two daughters. These daughters were twins, and so alike that during their childhood it was impossible to distinguish one from the other. Strangers could never do so; their mother rarely knew one from the other. I was the only person who could distinguish the difference between them, and my ability to do so rested solely upon the somewhat vague distinction of personality and character between them.

"One of them was an angel; the other was a devil. One inherited all that was good in her ancestors; the other seemed to be totally without conscience, heart, tenderness, compassion or the capacity to suffer. One would cry out at the prick of a pin; the other seemed insensible to physical suffering—and yet outwardly they were as alike as if one were the mirrored reflection of the other.

"You would suppose that this difference I have named would have been sufficient always to determine one from the other; but very early in their youth the wicked daughter discovered the one contrast between them, and after that she dissembled; and she did it so aptly and so ingeniously that when she chose to act her sister's part she deceived even me—partly.

"I had reached middle age when I married, and my daughters, were they here now, would be twenty-two years old.

"My marriage was a romantic affair, and, like most such, was a mistake. I need not go into the particulars of that time more than to say that I saved the life of a young woman under circumstances that were remarkable—and I married her after an acquaintance of seven days.

"It was not until long afterward that I discovered that my wife was descended on both sides from families of insane criminals. She was French. Her ancestors were galley slaves and convicts; some of them had died in prison; some had perished on the guillotine—and so on. It is a terrible and a sad history.

"Naturally, with our offspring, the wicked child was the favorite with the mother; the other one clung to me. I might tell you that my wife is at this moment a life prisoner in an English prison.

"When my wife was convicted and sentenced to prison I brought my daughters to this country; that was five years ago—a little more than that, to be correct. On board the ship that brought us here we made the acquaintance of a Captain Chester Mayne——"

Nick Carter gave a start and seemed about to interrupt; but he did not, and the old man continued:

"A Captain Chester Mayne, who was returning from abroad with his wife. My instinct tells me now that it was at the house of this Chester Mayne where the crime was committed into which you are now inquiring.

"An incomprehensible circumstance arose from the fact of that meeting. Captain Chester was able at once to accomplish that which I had always found difficult to do; that is, he was never deceived in the personality of my two children.

"He fell in love with Dema, the wicked one, notwithstanding the fact that he was married and that his wife was with him. She returned his love—and I know that the acquaintance was continued after our arrival in this country.

"It is possibly only an incident—but to me it is a significant one—that Captain Mayne's wife died soon after that. Shortly after that he returned to Europe—that was nearly five years ago. A few months later my daughter Dema followed him there. Dora remained with me.

"I have neglected to state that notwithstanding the difference in temperament between my daughters, there always existed a passionate fondness between them; on the part of Dora for Dema it was very marked. If Dema did not return it in full measure, she at least appeared to do so.

"I cannot say if Mayne and Dema were ever married or not. All that I do know is that Dema has remained in Paris all the time since then—save for an annual visit here—and that she has followed out the instinct of her forbears and has lived the life of a criminal. To my shame I must confess that under her assumed name she

is known as the queen of the most unconscionable gang of thieves and murderers in that wicked city. To me she boasts of it, and laughs while she boasts; to her sister she has told tales of her goodness, her charities, her benevolence, and her life of purity and high purpose—and the sister has believed.

"One year ago Dora married a man of wealth from the West. I will not mention his name. He is dead. He died—of apoplexy, the doctors called it; of poison administered by Dema, I believe—three months after the marriage. Dema was visiting them at the time. She returned to Paris shortly after that, but came here again two months ago to be present at the accouchment of her sister, which happened four weeks ago."

The two detectives looked at each other and nodded.

"Twelve days ago—you have said, I believe, that the murder was committed eleven days ago—twelve days ago Dema came here to this house to bid me good-bye and to tell me that she intended to sail for Paris the following day. She said that she would never return and that I would never see her again. She boasted of her crimes, of her wickedness, and of her glory in her wrongdoing, and she laughed at me when I remonstrated with her. She said that she was at the head of the most thoroughly organized company of criminals in Europe, and she admitted that Captain Mayne was her alter ego in all her criminal undertakings. She even stated that Mayne was here in this country with her, would return to Europe with her, and she boasted that they had committed many burglaries while they had been here—she living with her widowed sister and he inhabiting his own house—long in disuse—in the city."

"You say that that was twelve days ago?" asked Nick. "The day before the murder?"

"Yes."

"When did this lock go out of your possession?"

"Four years ago. Dema stole it—that is, she took it from me in my presence, declaring that she had use for it because it was better than one which required a key. Doubtless Captain Mayne has accompanied her on each of her visits here and has occupied the old house each time."

"Without doubt," agreed Nick Carter.

"She told me that she was to sail the following day. I looked at the passenger list and discovered that her name—she called herself Madam Demar—and that of Captain Chester was upon it, so I supposed they had sailed.

"While Dema was here I had not gone to see my other daughter, Dora, even though she had lately had a child, for the reason that my presence when they were together always brought about a quarrel between them; but after Dema had sailed, as I supposed, I went there. For several days I was refused admittance, and it was not until three days ago that I was admitted to the presence of my daughter and her child.

"I have told you that there was always an indefinable something which enabled me to tell one of my daughters from the other, even though an attempt was made by either of them to deceive me, and I must now admit to you that the two times I have called at Dora's home to see her since the birth of the child have filled me with misgivings, for I have had the instinctive dread that it was not Dora, but Dema, who received me. I seemed to have lost Dora; I did not *feel* her presence near me as I was wont to do; nor did I feel the relief which has always come to me when I have known that Dema was out of the country.

"Again, I missed a faithful maid who had been in Dora's service since her marriage. Janet had disappeared, and when I asked for her I was told that she had gone abroad with Dema."

The old man hesitated a moment, and then very solemnly he added:

"Yesterday morning, Mr. Carter, I saw the corpse of Janet exhibited at the morgue. I recognized it, but for obvious reasons I did not identify it. The body had been taken from the river the preceding day, and had been in the water several days. The woman had been murdered by a stab in the back."

Again there was a short pause, and then he continued:

"I saw not one of the old servants at Dora's home. They had all been replaced by new ones. He who acted as butler and who admitted me each time when I went there stirred up strange and incomplete memories within me.

"Mr. Carter, it is my belief at this moment that the butler who admitted me to that house is Captain Chester Mayne, in disguise; it is my belief that the young woman who was murdered was my daughter, Dora; and I also believe that Dema murdered her sister in order to possess herself of the wealth left to Dora by her husband. The posthumous child would inherit, of course, and by retaining possession of it Dema would ultimately secure all the wealth."

"But how could Dora have been lured to that house in the middle of the night?" asked the detective. "She seems to have gone there willingly."

"By a lie, doubtless. I have said that she was devoted to her sister. She knew little about Dema's faults. She knew nothing concerning the wickedness of Captain Mayne. Dema could easily have induced her to go to that house if she was made to believe that by doing so she would in some manner serve her sister.

"And now, sir, it is nearly midnight, but if you will go with me I will take you to the house of my daughter; and if we find that this awful condition which I fear does exist, I will not put a single obstacle between you and your manifest duty."

* * * * * * *

When Nick Carter ascended the front steps of the house, followed by his two companions, he motioned to them to be silent, and, making use of his picklock, he silently opened the front doors and the three passed inside the house.

There was a dim light in the front hall, and there had been another proceeding from the windows of the front room of the second floor; and as the detective, followed by the others, ascended the stairs, he saw that the door of that room was ajar, and he could hear the murmur of conversation from the interior of the room.

Drawing nearer so that he could peer into the room, Nick saw a man standing near the door. He was dressed for the street and seemed ready to take his departure; and the detective felt a clutch upon his arm, while the old man whispered into his ear:

"It is Mayne. I know him now."

The woman was talking, and she was evidently concluding an extended conversation. She was saying:

"So now we understand perfectly what we are to do.

I will not see you again. You will admit yourself to my father's apartments with the key you have; you will see that he makes no outcry, and you will inject the poison hypodermically, which will make it appear that he has died of apoplexy. You will take the early morning train for Boston, and sail from there to-morrow via the Cunard Line. Two weeks from to-day I will sail with the baby via the French Line for Havre, where you will meet me. The rest will be easy. With Janet dead and my father dead there will be none to question us. Dora's taking-off is forgotten, save by the police, and they are forgetting it as fast as they can. We will have her million now."

"Yes."

"Don't bungle this affair, Chester, as you did the other. That death-trap business of yours to catch Janet was about the acme of stupidity. You might have known that I would be waiting outside for her and that she would never get home alive. But go now. Go."

Nick Carter confronted the man in the doorway as he turned to leave the room, and the look of the two revolvers in the detective's hands awed him so that he made no resistance.

* * * * * * * *

There is not space to relate here the stories of these two murderers, told in their confessions. It is sufficient to epitomize the little that remains to be told.

The old man had not been aware of half of the villainy of his daughter Dema.

It appeared that Dema had waited patiently for the birth of Dora's child in order that there might be no impediment in the way of ultimately obtaining all of Dora's fortune; and with Chester Mayne she had crossed the ocean expressly for the purpose of carrying into effect the long-considered plot.

The old house had naturally been the chosen place for the murder. The falling snow that night had interfered with their plans, but they had got around it by adopting the expedient often used, of Dema's wearing a pair of Mayne's shoes over her own.

Janet took Dora to the house, and she was induced to go there on the plea that by paying a man whom they were to meet there a sum of twenty thousand dollars she would save her sister from prison. She had been assured that her sister was there, awaiting her—and the man, who was Mayne in disguise, met them at the gate and conducted the victim inside the house. Janet was told to return for her mistress in two hours.

Mayne conducted Dora into the house, and murdered her. After that he walked backward in his old tracks from the house to the street, looking for Janet, believing that she was waiting somewhere near. He had not found her because Dema had already lured her away to her death; and after being stabbed she was thrown into the river with the aid of a night-hawk hackman, bribed for the purpose.

Mayne, not finding her, had returned to the house. Fearing to remain there indefinitely awaiting the return of Janet, he arranged the so-called death-trap, after which he went to his room on the third floor for the few articles he wished to take away with him.

While there he heard the crash of Nick Carter's body as it fell to the floor under the stroke of the crowbar, and, silently descending the stairs, he discovered the form of Clune waiting at the gate. He concealed himself then and awaited an opportunity to escape from the house.

In the meantime Dema had returned there, after ridding herself of Janet; but, discovering the tracks of the policemen in the snow, had hurriedly decamped, also taking the precaution to walk backward in her own tracks, so that when Mayne finally ran from the house, it appeared as if one person had come and gone.

And so it appears that both Nick Carter's theories were correct in the main, as was also Chick's later one. There was really more coincidence than design about the depth of the plot and the supposed ingenuity of the plotters; but it all worked out in a manner to give the detective one of the greatest puzzles of his life.

THE END.

The next story, No. 482, will be entitled: Dema, the Dangerous; or, Nick Carter's Chase to Paris."

About the Early Numbers of The Tip Top Weekly

We receive hundreds of letters every week from readers asking if we can supply the early numbers of Tip Top containing Frank's adventures. In every case we are obliged to reply that numbers 1 to 100 are entirely out of print.

We would like to call the attention of our readers to the fact that the Frank Merriwell Stories now being published in book form in the Medal Library are reprints of these early numbers. The first book to appear was No. 250 entitled "Frank Merriwell's Schooldays."

We give herewith a complete list of all the stories that have been published in book form up to the time of writing. We will be glad to send a fine colored cover catalogue of the Medal Library which is just filled with good things for boys, upon receipt of a one-cent stamp to cover postage.

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